

‘TROUBLESOME’ VOICES

‘TROUBLESOME’ VOICES: REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACK WOMANHOOD IN
STREET LITERATURE AND HIP-HOP MUSIC

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation draws upon literary and cultural studies, hip-hop studies, and hip-hop feminism to explore Black women's critical engagement with the boundaries of Black womanhood in the cultural productions of street literature and hip-hop music. The term "troublesome" motivates my analysis as I argue that the works of writers Teri Woods and Sister Souljah and of rapper Lil' Kim create narratives that alternately highlight, reproduce, and challenge racist, classist, and sexist discourse on Black womanhood. Such narratives reveal hip-hop to be a site for critical reflection on Black womanhood and offer context-specific examples of the intersectionality of hip-hop generation women's experiences. This project also incorporates ethnographic methods to document and validate the experiential knowledge of street literature readers. In the growing body of scholarship on street literature (sometimes called hip-hop fiction), there is limited work on the intertextuality of hip-hop music and street literature, and the dialogic nature of their listening and reading publics. This project offers an analysis of the discursive contributions of street literature texts, hip-hop music, and consumers and participants of hip-hop culture by reading the texts and sites of the culture as constitutive of a Black public sphere. By using the framework of hip-hop feminism to analyze street literature and hip-hop music, this dissertation argues that these women's works demonstrate the possibilities in and through both popular mediums to trouble understandings of what Black feminism for the hip-hop generation is or can become.

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‘Troublesome’ Voices of Black Womanhood: an Introduction

The black public sphere - as a critical social imaginary - does not centrally rely on the world of magazines and coffee shops, salons and highbrow tracts. It draws energy from the vernacular practices of street talk and new musics, radio shows and church voices, entrepreneurship and circulation. Its task is not the provision of security for the freedom of conversation among intellectuals, as was the case with the bourgeois public spheres of earlier centuries. Rather, it marks a wider sphere of critical practice and visionary politics, in which intellectuals can join with the energies of the street, the school, the church, and the city to constitute a challenge to the exclusionary violence of much public space in the United States.

--The Black Public Sphere Collective, *The Black Public Sphere*, 1995 (2-3)

[T]rouble is inevitable and the task, how best to make it, what best way to be in it.

--Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 1990 (xxvii)

On Hearing the Troublesome Voice

As an African American teenage girl coming of age in the 1990s, my relationship with popular culture was a pleasure of everyday life. In the privacy of my own bedroom, equipped with my own television and stereo system, I sought out every bit of Black popular culture I could away from a parental eye. I watched MTV, BET, and VH1. I listened to the local hip-hop and R&B radio station, excited and energized by the performances of young Black artists, many of whom were not much older than myself. The first album I ever bought was *Life After Death* (1997) by the Notorious B.I.G. To this day, I still remember the skeptical but conceding look my mother gave me at the checkout counter as I tried to slide the CD onto the belt without her noticing. I knew that, being under eighteen, I would not be able to purchase it without parental permission. Though the content of that album was presumably “too grown” for my teen ears, my mother did not deny me my first album experience. (Perhaps my otherwise studious

habits made the concession easier to bear.) I listened to and watched artists like Lil' Kim, Foxy Brown, and Lauryn Hill alongside my pleasure readings of the writings of Sister Souljah, Omar Tyree, and Audre Lorde. Even before I had a language to describe my consumption practices, I knew that what I was reading, seeing, and listening to was part of a dynamic and varied representation of blackness. I also took great pleasure in knowing that a good portion of what I was consuming was not exactly approved by the adults in my life who may not have been pleased with some of the content of these materials. As I write this project, I often think back to the look my mother gave me – one that was withholding of approval but still trusting me to find my way. The culture produced all around me was beginning to make sense. This dissertation comes from a place of love and critique: I love hip-hop and this enables me to be critical of it and enjoy it. I am part of a generation of young Black women who share this hip-hop love story and are dedicated to thoughtful analyses of hip-hop culture as part of the field of African American literature and culture.

This sense of community that is formed around an affinity for hip-hop culture led me to this project. As a teen I was studious and quiet, but hip-hop enabled me to connect to others in my local sphere and, more broadly, with the public sphere that listened and called in to the radio station with requests and commentary about the latest new music. This experience demonstrated the power of music and the way the pleasures derived from it move between public and private spheres. The communities that form around hip-hop, often in public spaces like hair salons and barbershops, make up alternative public spheres that address issues relevant to the lives of their participants. The origin story of

this project is set in one of these spaces. Sometime in 2009 while waiting in a Newark, New Jersey hair salon, I overheard a conversation unfold in the adjacent barbershop. The barbershop had a radio tuned to a New York City station and a Lil' Kim song began to play. Because of my own perception of her image as an artist, I assumed the conversation would revolve around her explicit lyrics and bad girl persona. As an English Masters student with a concentration in women's and gender studies, I was learning to equip myself with an academic language to critique the world around me. I was invigorated by this new kind of scholarly, theoretical, and activist knowledge, one that helped me make sense of the tangle of thoughts and emotions I felt about a number of experiences I saw unfolding in my own life and the lives of those around me. I was confident that this group of men was going to confirm the worst of my assumptions about sexist attitudes. Instead, an exchange of ideas about Black women's sexual agency and economic empowerment took place, though not expressed in those terms. This everyday occurrence challenged me to think more (or perhaps less) critically of the consumption of such popular figures such as Lil' Kim, Foxy Brown, and Missy Elliott, and the possibilities for critical discourse in different public spheres. In that space, I was reminded of my younger self, nearly twelve years prior, as I bought my first rap album and the critical abilities that I possessed then and have since honed. The ideas of this project are thus indebted to the vibrancy of Black public spheres and the cultural texts that inspire critical discourse within them.

Hip-hop feminism is the main conceptual framework through which I analyze a range of hip-hop cultural sites and objects—street literature (also known as hip-hop fiction), independent Black bookstores, music performance and imagery—as constituting

a Black public sphere with its own discursive practices. In this introductory chapter, I outline the theoretical concepts drawn from ethnographic practice, public sphere theory, Black and hip-hop feminisms, and African American literary and cultural criticism necessary for situating Black women's participation in the genres of hip-hop music and street literature. In the subsequent chapters, I critically examine the sites of two independent Black bookstores, Black and Nobel (Philadelphia, PA) and Source of Knowledge (Newark, NJ), Teri Woods's *True to the Game* (1994), Sister Souljah's *No Disrespect* (1996) and *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999), and Lil' Kim's *Hard Core* (1996) and *Notorious K.I.M.* (2000). I will identify the specific characteristics and aesthetic choices of each of these texts and sites that demonstrate the importance of intersectional feminism and cultural criticism for the hip-hop (and post-hip-hop) generation. The major areas of inquiry that run throughout this project include matters of confronting stereotypes, respectability politics, representation, and visibility in mainstream discourse. The texts under study reveal the extent to which hip-hop culture in the 1990s became a site for critical reflection on the signification of Black womanhood. My analysis of these texts demonstrates the potential for popular culture to offer critiques of racism, models of femininity and masculinity, and the policing of Black women's bodies and sexuality while also engaging with their complexities and contradictions. By combining literary and cultural analysis with ethnographic work, I posit a hip-hop feminist framework for addressing the following questions: What is at stake in the reproduction of respectability politics for Black communities? How does dominant discourse about literary and cultural merit within public spheres reiterate racist, classist and sexist stereotypes about Black

subjectivities? And finally, what does a hip-hop sensibility offer for strategies of resistance to racialized and gendered modes of oppression?

Defining Terms

This project analyzes articulations within public discourse that trouble normative understandings of Black womanhood in order to offer evidence of the heterogeneity within Black women's subjectivity. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler characterizes trouble as an inevitable condition, highlighting a familiar childhood discourse in which "the prevailing law threatened one with trouble, even put one in trouble, all to keep one out of trouble" (xxvii). In this project, I see the representation of Black women's identities as instantiations of the prior condition of trouble highlighted by Butler. As voices that are already presumed to be troublesome by their very existence, the works analyzed here demonstrate how the term "troublesome" operates as one with a dual meaning: a voice can be troubling because of what or who it represents and how; the same voice can be troubling to prevailing discourse because it highlights oppressive tendencies that marginalize certain communities and subject positions. I characterize the troublesome voice as a fluid mode of resistance that can be insightful and productive for anti-oppressive thought and action in response to specific challenges of increasingly limited employment opportunity, the crack epidemic, and the vast consequences of the War on Drugs faced by the hip-hop generation.

Hip-Hop Feminism

This project works across boundaries of genre that tend to isolate reading and writing from music and performance. Black feminist scholarship like Angela Y. Davis's *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (1999) and Hazel Carby's "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues" (1986) detail how Black women performers have used musical forms to articulate a feminist consciousness that is not bound to normative notions of gender and race. I aim to add to this articulation of alternative consciousness by linking the constructions of Black womanhood produced by women of the hip-hop generation, which is defined as the age group of those born between the years 1965 and 1984 (Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation* xiii), to the genealogy of Black women's resistance. Hip-hop is often read as a male-dominated space; however, this reading masks the contributions and presence of women (often of color) who were integral to its beginnings and continue to be active participants in the culture. Though the most highly commercialized version of hip-hop culture demonstrates misogynistic and sexist representations of masculinity and femininity, hip-hop is far too rich to allow this single version to dominate critique and dialogue. Scholarship by Joan Morgan, Mark Anthony Neal, Cheryl L. Keyes, and Tricia Rose, to name a few, demonstrates the theoretical and imaginative depth of hip-hop studies.¹ As Aisha Durham notes, "Their interventions offer a more inclusive discussion

¹ See Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life as a Hip-Hop Feminist*, New York: Simon & Schuster (1999); Cheryl L. Keyes, "Empowering Self, Making Choices, Creating Spaces: Black Female Identity via Rap Music Performances," *That's the Joint!: The Hip-hop Studies Reader*, edited by Mark Anthony Neal and Murray Forman, New York: Routledge (2012); Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap*

of hip-hop by intersecting racialized class with gender” (“Hip Hop Feminist Media Studies” 118).

Hip-hop feminism as a critical framework was first theorized outside of the academic language of (Black) feminism. In the ground-breaking text *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life as a Hip-Hop Feminist*, Morgan coined the phrase ‘hip-hop feminism’ to describe a feminism that “seeks empowerment on spiritual, material, physical, and emotional levels” by sitting with and working through the contradictions that arise in Black women’s experiences with sexism and racism. Morgan views the bad taste of the “f-word” that lingered after confronting the problem of “white women’s racism” and the Feminist Movement as “abstractions drawn from someone else’s history” that hold little meaning for her generation (53). However, she importantly acknowledges that hip-hop generation women are the “daughters of feminist privilege” (59). With this admission, Morgan makes clear the importance of historic Black feminism to the contemporary generation. She questions why “even the gainfully degreed ... would rather trick away our last twenty-five dollars on that news nineties black girl fiction (trife as some of it may be) than some of those good, but ... laboriously academic black feminist texts” (53). As she intimates, the narratives presented in “nineties black girl fiction” (like *True to the Game* or *The Coldest Winter Ever*, for example) speak to hip-hop generation women in ways that are not readily decipherable within a historic Black feminist frame of reference. These are the kinds of contradictions and complexities that motivate this

Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America, Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press (1994); and Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture*, New York: Routledge (1999).

project. The women and works under study in this project exemplify the multiplicity of notions of womanhood while offering contestation to regimes of knowledge and power that attempt to inscribe their effects upon the bodies of Black women. Tracy D. Sharpley-Whiting posits that the “linking of hip hop and feminism not only represents the simultaneous generational relevancy of both, but has the effect of offering hip hop the much-needed progressive gender analysis it lacks and feminism the ground it is undeniably losing” (152). As such, the analysis of hip-hop through a feminist framework holds generative potential. I argue that hip-hop feminism, with its emphasis on the intersection of race, hip-hop culture, and contemporary gender politics, prioritizes the experiences and knowledge of hip-hop generation women and makes self-reflexive and cultural critique possible in the contemporary moment.

Gwendolyn Pough’s theorization of “bringing wreck” elucidates an element of hip-hop culture that marks its potentiality for resistance. She defines “wreck” as “a Hip-Hop term that connotes fighting, recreation, skill, boasting, or violence” (17). Wreck, thus, is specific to the conditions under which it is deployed. It is politically disruptive to structures of power—be they of race, gender, or class—that seek to regulate the modes of engagement and access to public spheres. One can bring wreck sonically, as Lil’ Kim does, visually to “bring an entirely different performance of difference” (144) as Nicole Fleetwood describes in *Troubling Vision*, or through literature as both Woods and Souljah do, to varying degrees. As Pough argues, “Bringing wreck, for Black participants in the public sphere historically, has meant reshaping the public gaze in such a way as to be recognized as human beings – as functioning and worthwhile members of society –

and not to be shut out of or pushed away from the public sphere” (17). I connect Pough’s interventions in theorizing a Black public sphere—where the goal of bringing wreck is to claim “both a voice and a living ... in a society bereft of opportunity” (27)—to my efforts to highlight both the advantages and limitations of voice. I argue that certain voices, even within an alternative Black public sphere, become “troublesome” with regard to the content of their message. As Pough also highlights, there are ways in which “various factions of Black communities sometimes oppress one another” (35). Acknowledging intracommunal tensions and oppression as they arise in examples of sexism and homophobia is a necessary act for a hip-hop feminism that is self-reflexive and relevant to the complexities and contradictions lived by its advocates.

Black feminist thought has often taken to examining popular culture as a site for theorizations of the intersection of race, class, and gender. Patricia Hill Collins notes that many women of color, in recognition of the power of hip-hop to simultaneously “oppress and liberate women,” have turned to “mass-market venues to express feminist sensibilities” (*From Black Power to Hip Hop* 192). Nowhere is this more evident than in the cultural productions of Black women at the turn of the twenty-first century. By combining the theoretical framework of Black feminist thought with their own experiential knowledge, hip-hop feminists recognize the tensions between the culture of hip-hop, with its coinciding oppressive and liberatory elements, and the goals of feminism for Black women. As Whitney Peoples suggests, hip-hop feminists make use of their experiential knowledge to offer nuanced challenges to assumptions that question the utility of bridging a hip-hop sensibility with feminism (26). Such inventiveness

“[represents] the creativity and dynamism for which black feminism is traditionally known” (Peoples 47).

The Crunk Feminist Collective (hereafter the CFC) offers a salient example of the dynamism and timely, critical responsiveness to which Peoples refers. Their blog dedicated to building and fostering a rhetorical community for “hip-hop generation feminists of color, queer and straight, in the academy and without” enacts the kind of critical hip-hop culture imparted by women of the hip-hop generation (The Crunk Feminist Collective). In “The Stage Hip Hop Feminism Built,” Crunk feminists Aisha Durham, Brittney C. Cooper, and Susana M. Morris outline hip-hop feminism:

We see hip-hop feminism as a generationally specific articulation of feminist consciousness, epistemology, and politics rooted in the pioneering work of multiple generations of black feminists based in the United States and elsewhere in the diaspora but focused on questions and issues that grow out of the aesthetic and political prerogatives of hip-hop culture. (722)

This articulation links hip-hop feminism to historical Black feminists as a way of acknowledging a debt that can only be paid forward, while simultaneously offering a political legitimization of the efforts of a hip-hop generation that is sometimes critiqued as being devoid of organized activism.²

² My language of “debt” here is inspired by Fred Moten and Stefano Harvey’s conversation in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (2013). Speaking of the distribution of common resources, Moten argues, “You can’t count how much we owe one another. It’s not countable. It doesn’t even work that way” (154). I find this line of thought particularly useful for thinking through the genealogies of anti-oppression movements.

The CFC describes hip-hop feminism as a “percussive feminism,” highlighting both its disruptive (“bringing wreck”) and generative qualities: “Percussive feminism allows for the creativity that ensues from placing modes or objects of inquiry together that might not traditionally fit, hip-hop and feminism being only the most obvious example” (Durham, Cooper and Morris 724). As Durham, Cooper, and Morris emphasize, there is generative potential in these spaces of discord or disruption, where ideas may bump against one another. The friction this percussiveness creates serves as an intervention against hegemonic forces that seek to dictate the limits and boundaries of Black women’s subjectivity and production of knowledge.

The works under study in this project offer a range of representational issues significant to constructions of Black womanhood, many of which are at odds with the respectability politics of a Black middle-class sensibility aligned with the American Dream. This divergence in ideals of representation and visibility offers an important entry point for discussions of Black women’s identity politics. As Kimberly Springer argues, “If we wait for positive, feminist songs to hit the R&B or rap airwaves, we will never make the interventions so desperately needed among young Black people—not to mention those in the dominant culture who take sexist representations as representative of African-American culture” (1079). Springer highlights the necessity of engaging in public discourse in accessible ways. By taking on these popular representations, I hope to offer a mode of critique that validates and thinks with the experiential knowledge of Black women’s reading and listening culture.

On Doing Fieldwork

Let me start by borrowing the following:

Tenets of a Twenty-First-Century Black Feminist Ethnography:

mshai: To honour and affirm Black/African women's ways of speaking and making meaning ...

mecca: To make room for collective meaning-making, that embraces others' ideas and concerns and input ...

mshai: To claim space for those who have been marginalized in the spaces that I work

meida: To analyze, working to understand why what is so is so, and whether it should stay as is or change . . . and how

(Craft et al 70)

“‘Troublesome’ Voices” focuses on matters of representation with regard to race and gender. As part of this endeavor, I follow Renée Alexander Craft, Meida Mcneal, Mshai S. Mwangola, and Queen Meccasia Zabriskie to offer space to voices that are marginalized or otherwise ignored in scholarship. To do so, I incorporate fieldwork interviews about street literature and hip-hop culture with patrons and employees of two Black-owned, urban bookstores—Source of Knowledge in Newark, New Jersey and Black and Nobel in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Each bookstore owner was extremely helpful in offering their time and space for my interviews and encouraging others within the store to speak with me. I greatly appreciate their generosity and openness.

As a Black woman academic keen to do fieldwork as part of a literary and cultural criticism project, I turned to the history of Black women's writing for inspiration. In my review of Zora Neale Hurston's work, I came across a passage that speaks to the class-based considerations of doing such work within Black communities. Hurston, in her

encounters with Black folks during her ethnographic research, found delight in creating her own crime fictions to encourage people to trust her with their tales. In *Mules and Men* she writes,

The car made me look too prosperous. So they set me aside as different. And since most of them were fugitives from justice or had done plenty time, a detective was just the last thing they felt they needed on that “job.” I took occasion that night to impress the job with the fact that I was also a fugitive from justice, “bootlegging.” They were hot behind me in Jacksonville and they wanted me in Miami. So I was hiding out. That sounded reasonable. Bootleggers always have cars. I was taken in. (61)

Hurston’s strategy is one of deception, but her intent was to gain the trust of the community. She understood that a car was a marker of class distinction that could draw suspicion. She needed people to feel comfortable enough with her to share their stories and in order to gain that trust she tried to make herself seem more like them. Scripting a narrative about her own criminality was essential to her project. This false but “reasonable” narrative succeeded. She was able to ingratiate herself with the community and fulfill her goal of recognizing the stories of all community members, regardless of run-ins with the law, as ones worth hearing and recording.

Doing fieldwork as a member of an academic institution requires careful reflection on the implicit benefit and possible harm of such work. (Hurston’s methods of gaining the trust of her participants would likely not satisfy an ethics review board today.) Richard Iton is particularly critical of the African American gaze across class identifications, which he refers to as the “romantic engagements the middle classes can have with lower-income constituencies” (164). He describes Hurston, Langston Hughes,

Chester Himes, Miles Davis, and LeRoi Jones (aka Amiri Baraka) and street literature forefather Donald Goines as “products of the middle class” who set a precedent of negotiating “a space for themselves within the ranks of the supposed black authentic by imagining, engaging, and constructing often extreme representations of black life” (164-5). Iton does raise an important point about the extreme nature of the representations each of the writers and performers named has produced, and, following Iton, I consider how, in this project, I as a critic may be implicated in this manner. The class-based gaze is not the only point of potentially problematic difference. Part of the trouble with reading and analyzing street literature is addressing the charge of its consumers being interested in “pathology porn,” a phrase that has been deployed as a critique of the work of Black woman writer Sapphire.³ In Chapter Two, “Black Bookstores as Discursive Spaces,” I detail fieldwork interviews and reflect on my role as a scholar within spheres of which I am both a part (as a Black woman from New Jersey) and apart from because of the class and education distinctions that afford me a particular kind of privilege tied to cultural capital. While enacting the politics of a Black feminist ethnography was important to my fieldwork task, addressing the ethical and the theoretical challenges of power and privilege in ethnographic work proved to require complex negotiations and renegotiations.

Feminist debates about power and privilege with regard to representation have engaged questions similar to one posed by Linda Alcoff: “is it ever valid to speak for

³ Both of Sapphire’s novels *Push* and *The Kid* deal with plot lines involving sexual and emotional abuse within African American family structures.

others who are unlike me or who are less privileged than me?” (7) In asking this of oneself, a scholar must consider the ways in which identity and social location dialectically impact how we are seen and heard and how we see and hear others. Alcoff rightly notes that *all* representations are mediated and thus, when doing the kind of work ethnography calls for, we cannot understand representation “as founded on an act of discovery,” where we discover and relate interviewees’ “true selves” (9). Indeed, I do not view the interviews I completed as representative of anyone’s (including my own) true self. In recognizing how the self is socially constructed (a point I acknowledge in Chapter Two by listing some of the various identity labels applied to me by myself and others) and mediated by the particulars of the location and participants in the interviews, I concede that the power of interpretation lies with me as the interviewer. In analyzing the interviews, I do not seek a particular truth; instead, I work to contextualize their content and, as Joan Sangster suggests, “analyse the subtexts and silences” (7) that are decipherable to me from an insider/outsider point of view.

Fieldwork was a return to spaces that were both familiar and new. In June 2013, I visited Source of Knowledge and Black and Nobel to speak with people about their impressions of street literature and hip-hop culture. Not all of the people I met and spoke with during those visits are quoted or discussed in that chapter; however, their participation must be noted as germane to my broader argument about the role of such spaces in the construction and maintenance of a critical Black public sphere. I chose these particular stores because of their sustained visibility and presence in their cities; I was interested in the cities of Newark and Philadelphia partly because of my personal

knowledge of them but also largely because of their importance as cultural hubs of African American experience. Both Philadelphia and Newark are home to majority Black populations. As of 2013, Philadelphia held a population that identified as 44.2% Black or African-American alone, and Newark held a population that was 52.4% Black or African-American alone. In terms of economics, the median household income for Philadelphia from 2009-2013 was \$37,192, and 26.5% of the population reported income below the poverty level. Newark's median household income for the same time period was \$33,960 with even higher rates of poverty as 29.1% of the population had income below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau). Historically, both cities were spaces of civil rights struggles, economic opportunity and cultural liveliness for Black people and, in some ways continue to be, but like many American cities, discriminatory housing policies and "white flight" left both cities economically unstable. The consequences of globalization are currently being lived out by residents of Newark, Philadelphia, and other cities like them where job opportunities are limited. As Michelle Alexander outlines in *The New Jim Crow*, globalization led to the loss of industrial work for inner-city workers in the 1970s. The War on Drugs, starting in the 1980s, and shifts in funding from public housing to prison construction have also wreaked havoc on urban populations (57-60).

In addition to their importance as predominantly Black sites, both cities hold particular importance within the Black urban fiction publishing industry and within the narratives crafted by Woods and Souljah. These sites are more than just sites of commerce; they are sites of community. As Craft et al (known as the Quilt Collective) write, ethnography "[deals] with the cultural practices of the everyday that affirm, embed,

shore up and contest the status quo” (68). I echo them in saying, “Fieldwork and ethnography are gifts of reciprocity, not imperial entitlements” (62). As I will show in Chapter Two, the interviews evince the critical liveliness of such spaces while documenting and validating an experiential and culturally-specific knowledge; nonetheless, they are, admittedly, part of a project designed to further my own professional goals. After I shared my professional reasons for doing this work with interviewees, many of them still embraced me in the spirit of community and for that I am appreciative.

Black Public Spheres

In this project I characterize the independent Black bookstore as a Black public sphere. Foundational Black cultural studies works have theoretically challenged the idea of “the public sphere” to instead consider what Thomas C. Holt describes as “a plurality of spheres” (328). My approach to the themes of this project as they appear across different mediums is also informed by this work and that of Stuart Hall. In “The Work of Representation,” Hall argues “representation is the production of meaning through language” (16). I extend Hall’s analysis—as many scholars have—to argue that, in addition to language, the production of meaning occurs across various registers and as such, this dissertation explores a range of hip-hop cultural sites and objects as constitutive of an active Black public sphere with its own aesthetics and discursive practices.

Hip-hop culture encompasses music, literature, fashion, and imagery, making analyses of the field necessarily broad-reaching in their interdisciplinary approaches. In

her study of African diasporic family photography, Tina Campt offers a particularly rich example of this diversity when she notes that the social life of visual culture lies in the sensory experiences of sight, touch, and sound (18). Photographic images, Campt argues, demonstrate “how black people image and imagine themselves,” stressing the point that “images matter to black folks” (5). Self-imaging then becomes a way of producing discourse that may align with or counter dominant representations in public spheres. For the Black recording artist, the visual image is an important medium for meaning-making; however, the image of an artist is often influenced by other parties and interests, making the decoding of an artist’s representation via sound or vision more mediated and complex.

Given the “social life of visual culture” (Campt 18), it is necessary to consider the discursive field when theorizing representation across mediums. Discourse, in the Foucauldian sense, emphasizes cultural understanding and shared meanings within a community or sphere in which power and knowledge circulate and operate in accordance with the structures of the specified community. With discourse comes counter-discourse, particularly within alternative public spheres, acting as a form of resistance to the regulating force of discourse that delegitimizes some knowledges while allowing others to stand as truths. This “discursive contestation” (Fraser 86) generates different ways of knowing and being. Hall posits that we are shaped and influenced by meanings derived from social practices and, consequently “all practices have a discursive aspect” (“The West and the Rest” 291). In this project, I aim to provide an analysis that establishes hip-

hop culture as a Black public sphere that is both critical and dynamic according to the needs of its constituents.

This project characterizes independent Black bookstores as material sites of critical discourse, fostering a space for world building and meaning making. Black bookstores offer an alternative to “the public sphere,” which Jürgen Habermas defines as “a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed” that has access “guaranteed to all citizens” (49). Habermas’s concept of the public sphere is limited in scope and relevance to the conditions of the sites of this project but, as Gwendolyn Pough notes, his insight “can help us to see how Black people have renegotiated the public sphere in order to claim a public voice” (18). I posit that such renegotiations have not only led to theoretical considerations of “the black public sphere” as an alternative to “the public sphere,” but onward to thinking about a multiplicity of Black public spheres. In particular, I highlight independent Black bookstores as sites of hip-hop culture and spaces of alternative Black publics.

Theorizing Black bookstores as discursive spaces is a major part of this project’s contribution to thinking about the politics of gender, race, and class in Black cultural production. In *The Black Public Sphere*, Holt writes, “If we are to understand the conditions of possibility for historically specific black publics, it makes a difference where people lived, how they lived, and what was happening in the world(s) in which they lived” (327). My experience in that Newark barbershop challenged me to think about the politics of consumption in different public spheres. The purpose of the

interviews was to hear – from the streets – what the popularity of street literature has meant for Black bookstores catering largely to Black reading populations. Those who spoke with me also demonstrated the importance of the bookstores as meeting places from which critical discourse can emerge. Yet, even within these alternative public spheres, the dynamics of gender-based hierarchies of power can persist. The cultural texts that I analyze in this project speak to the problematics of addressing Black women's concerns in spaces that are typically dominated by male voices. As Michael C. Dawson argues, "There can be no mass-based Black counterpublic if Black women are continually denied the right to basic humanity and voice" (220-21). Hip-hop culture and its corresponding body of criticism reveal hip-hop to be complex in its intersection of gender, race and class, demonstrating specific advantages and risks for Black women writers, readers, performers, and listeners. Debates about street literature and hip-hop music and performance are not merely about countering racialized and gendered stereotypes, but also include concerns about class values, how such texts are consumed, and by whom.

The stakes of representation are most evident within the mainstream American public sphere. It is within this sphere that the importance of recognition makes itself most clearly known. Charles Taylor argues that "nonrecognition" or misrecognition "can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being" (25). When one is not recognized as someone with the same rights and entitlements to public discourse or representation, the modes of living and being that seem possible are diminished. Such diminishment may come in different

forms—it may wear the mask of respectability, with its yet unfulfilled promise of dignity, or it may appear as one of the controlling images, as Patricia Hill Collins describes in *Black Feminist Thought*, which seek to limit the scripts of Black womanhood to stereotypical representations. Consequently, self-definition is a critical area of inquiry for this project.

In “‘Troublesome’ Voices,” self-definition is explored as both a consideration of the particularities of the self (as constituted by one’s surroundings), with its requisite needs and desires, alongside the generalities implied in the identity markers of “Black” and “woman.” The context of the 1990s is historicized, in the lineage of Black activism, as a post-civil rights, post-Black Power moment. The so-called lack of an organized political movement attending to the needs of Black people in the United States is often taken up as part of critiques of hip-hop that deride it as a distraction—an example of a turn to self-indulgent individualism that reveals what has gone off-track with the hip-hop generation. Building on previous feminist theorizations of the personal as political, this project highlights how such critiques often employ standards of activism that rely on publicity that can result in misreadings of the cultural activity. As Nathalie Weidhase argues with regard to critiques of Beyoncé’s brand of feminism, the lack of an intersectional lens prevents white feminism from attending to the persisting context of respectability politics, the policing of Black women’s bodies, and the contradictions or

gray areas of lived experience that hip-hop feminism addresses (130).⁴ Framed by this intersecting racialized and gendered misreading, the popularity of Black women's cultural productions in this moment often leads to assumptions that the focus on Black women's intimate lives comes at the expense of organized political projects. In fact, these personal topics are political ones: Black women's writing and music demonstrate the way power circulates within and throughout larger state bodies *and* their intimate and familial relations. Reading the personal as political means breaking down the binaries that separate the private from public, the domestic from the state, the self from culture, and the individual from community. This task requires demonstrating how these categories are mutually constituted. Taylor suggests that the "good things in life can be transformed by our enjoying them in common with people we love" (33). Acknowledging the common enjoyment of things as part of identity formation recognizes the dialogic aspect of human life, which plays a role in the development of "individual tastes and desires and opinions and aspirations" (Taylor 33-4). By thinking about the dialogic aspects of the formation of public spheres, I seek to highlight the importance of pleasure and community against the backdrop of calls for respectability in the face of racial and gender-based oppression.

⁴ At the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards, Beyoncé performed the song "***Flawless" from her 2013 self-titled album. She performed the song, which samples Chimimanda Adichie's speech "We Should All Be Feminists," in front of a backdrop with the word "FEMINIST." Beyoncé has openly claimed the label of feminist in recent years but has been criticized by white feminists for her celebration of her marriage, her performance attire, and other aspects of her representation that some find at odds with "feminism," generally speaking.

Contestations of respectability politics are visible within the sphere of popular culture through the construction of hip-hop cultural producers' images and the ways in which consumers make sense of them. As Manthia Diawara suggests, "Popular culture has always been where black people theorize blackness in America. It has always constituted the sphere where black people produce narratives of pleasure, oppression, resistance, survival, and heroic performances" (2). However, Whitney Peoples argues that the most easily *commodified* rap music "represents ideas of blackness that are in line with dominant racist and sexist ideologies; it has economic potential only because it works hand-in-hand with long established ideas about the sexual, social, and moral nature of black people" (24). This example of popular culture being taken up as representative of blackness reveals the burden of representation to be especially problematic. Both Diawara and Peoples point to the various modes of representation that exist within Black popular culture, suggesting that each mode demonstrates the multiplicity and contradiction that is bound to arise in the cultural sphere. In short, the popularity of certain kinds of Black cultural productions is itself a matter for examination and critique. This thesis explores a range of narratives that highlight, challenge, and reproduce sexist, classist, and racist representations of blackness in popular culture. In an effort to look beyond assumptions about popular culture that dismiss it as a compromised space, I ask, what can we learn from Black popular culture that critiques of capitalism have not already told us? What happens when those who consume this culture closely identify with texts on the basis of race and gender? I address these questions by exploring the politics of representation within hip-hop era African American writing, reading, and

listening practices in order to address the dynamics of class and gender within African American cultural production.

The primary focus of my analysis will be on how African American communities make sense of representational images in popular fiction and music, particularly within spheres where Black writers and performers can produce for a mostly Black audience.⁵ My choice of texts from the 1990s does not necessarily represent the critically favoured music by political artists like Lauryn Hill or late eighties/early nineties Queen Latifah. I do not examine the popular and successful novels of Terri McMillan or Bebe Moore Campbell, for example.⁶ Instead, I take up the “troublesome” street literature texts of Teri Woods and Sister Souljah (whose name is now synonymous with radical outspokenness). For the purposes of my project, I refer to the subgenre of Black popular fiction as “street literature,” following the cues of scholars like LaMonda Horton Stallings, Kristina Graaff and Justin Gifford. The term “street literature,” as used by such scholars, refers to texts that feature the stories of “pimps, prisoners, and female hustlers” that combine urban realism and utopian fantasy (Gifford 8) in the contemporary African American literary market. I choose this phrasing as a way of denoting a level of seriousness in my critical approach to the genre since “literature” carries a cachet that is relinquished within

⁵ Though mainstream crossover is often taken as proof of commercial success, the politics of representation imbue such crossovers with specific burdens that are not the primary focus of this study.

⁶ The works of McMillan and Campbell represent a remarkable shift in black women’s visibility within popular culture in the 1990s and into the 2000s. Their black female protagonists are described as relatable but are also quite regularly characterized as middle-class. The black women writers represented in this project are more closely aligned with black working-class culture.

shortened terms like “lit.”⁷ I see street literature as a distinguishable subset of African American fiction that is part of a tradition of Black writing but also, at times, at odds with African American literary fiction. My use of the term “street literature” is meant to ground my discussion in a scholarly discourse that, in debates about canonical African American literature, might question the legitimacy of studying the subgenre as a site of cultural inquiry.

The voices of Woods, Souljah, and Lil’ Kim represent a segment of the Black community that speaks from a hip-hop point of view, one that aspires to models of success that can seem to emphasize individualism and material wealth (a model that is deeply steeped in the ideals of the American Dream) over more communal political advancement. This seemingly inward or individualist turn speaks to the difference in both the goals and strategies for empowerment of the disenfranchised. Woods, Souljah, and Lil’ Kim each articulate a specific version of what empowerment looks like for Black women that is based on particularized experience, and, at first glance, these visions do not readily lend themselves to the kinds of progressive politics expected within the trajectory of Black feminism or activism. Iton links the reading of late 1980s and early 1990s hip-hop as depoliticized to gender-based assumptions of political activity that decry the expression of so-called private (women’s) concerns as illegitimate forms of political engagement:

⁷ In addition to “street lit,” the shortening of “lit” is most often applied to popular genre fiction like “chick lit,” for example. Colloquially, this practice is facilitated by publishers who actively market texts under this label. Some scholars like Marc Lamont Hill, Biany Perez, and Decoteau J. Irby alternate between “street lit” and “street literature.”

The distinction of private realm (female) versus public realm (male), then, has been reinforced in contemporary African American popular culture with hip-hop – or, more accurately, some of the ‘political’ subgenres of hip-hop – assuming that issues involving gender relations are not worthy of discussion and indeed that effective politics requires the exclusion of women. (276)

This exclusion of Black women from the African American political landscape reflects the history of African American women’s writing traditions in the twentieth century. Like their foremothers Hurston and Alice Walker, for example, Black women writers in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first century have had to face criticism, often from their male peers, about their representations of so-called women’s issues and Black gender relations in their writing.⁸ In many ways, the responses (detailed in the following chapters) reveal how Black women’s voices have always been troublesome in a public sphere that sees their matters of concern as non-political. Street literature produced by Black women, like previous forms of Black women’s writing have been, is critiqued for its content which some argue revels in stereotype and gratuitous sex and violence. While womanist or Black feminist politics and critical race theory are more evident in the works of Walker or Toni Morrison, for example, street literature, with its cynical representation of silence in/as trauma between women— “Fuck it. She’ll learn for herself” (Souljah, *Coldest* 413)—does not readily lend itself to a clear political stance.

⁸ Hurston’s work was famously criticized by Richard Wright and Alain Locke, both whom deemed her work as a hindrance to the project of racial justice (See Wright, “Between Laughter and Tears,” *New Masses*, 5 October 1937 and Locke, *Opportunity*, 1 June 1938). The film adaptation for Walker’s *The Color Purple* was also criticized, particularly by black men who viewed her representation of black masculinity as stereotypical and damaging (see Jacqueline Bobo, “Black Women’s Responses to the *Color Purple*,” *Jump Cut* 33 (1988), 43-51.).

As a fiction of and by the hip-hop generation, street literature represents the conundrum of the current political climate in which the gains of the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the Black Power movement of the 1970s are presumed by some to have solved the “problem” of race in America. The content of street literature exposes how the existence of formal equality in the form of legislation and reform has not resulted in substantive equality. The lives of those who write and inspire street literature tales attest to the continuing challenges and hardships associated with blackness and womanhood in America.

African American Literary Criticism & Street Literature

The formation of the African American canon has been shaped partly by exclusion from the larger canon of American literature; similarly, the writing and reading culture of street literature is influenced by the larger canon of the African American tradition and its own politics of exclusion of certain voices. As I explore in Chapters One and Two, the narrative themes of making a life out of economic lack, overcoming race and gender oppression, and the plights often linked to urban America persist across both canonical and street literature texts. Bernard Bell argues that the contribution and significance of each American writer of African descent is “influenced by his or her relationship to past and present writers, as well as by the relationship of his or her texts to others in the tradition” (74). Despite the consistent themes, the cultural capital of “serious” literary texts, when compared to that of street literature, creates a hierarchy of distinction among readers, which African American literary criticism reveals. In particular, the narrative frequency of plots about female hustlers, drug dealers, and

prisoners in street literature, I suggest, has made it a challenging subgenre for African American literary criticism to consider, and the body of scholarship dedicated to analyzing street literature demonstrates this tension. While scholars like Graaff and Candice L. Jackson have positioned their work as being anxiously critical of the genre's representation of problematic behaviors and narrative themes involving drugs, sex, and crime, other scholars like Megan Sweeney; co-authors Simone Gibson, Elizabeth Marshall, and Jeanine Staples; co-authors Marc Lamont Hill, Bianny Perez, and Decoteau Irby; and Gifford have made significant strides in analyzing the genre's readership and larger cultural implications.⁹ This project seeks to add a new dimension of analysis to the growing body of work on the genre by employing the critical framework of hip-hop feminism, and the nuanced analysis it allows for, to account for the discursive significance of such texts to discussions of gender, race and class within the field of African American literature and culture for its largely young, Black reading public.

⁹ See Simone Gibson, Elizabeth Marshall, and Jeanine Staples, "Ghetto Fabulous: Reading Black Adolescent Femininity in Contemporary Urban Street Fiction," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 53.1 (September 2009): 28-35; Justin Gifford, *Pimping Fictions: African American Crime Literature and the Untold Story of Black Pulp Publishing* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013); Kristina Graaff, "Street Literature and the Mode of Spectacular Writing: Popular Fiction Between Sensationalism, Education, Politics, and Entertainment" in *Contemporary African American Literature: The Living Canon* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), p. 113-134; Marc Lamont Hill, Bianny Perez, and Decoteau J. Irby, "Street Fiction: What Is It and What Does It Mean for English Teachers?" *English Journal* 97.3 (Jan. 2008): 76-81; Candice Love Jackson, "From writer to reader: black popular fiction" in *The Cambridge History of African American Literature*. Ed. Maryemma Graham and Jerry W. Ward Jr. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 655-679; and Megan Sweeney, *Reading is My Window: Books and the Art of Reading in Women's Prisons* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

Scholarship on street literature often seeks to validate its study by positioning the genre as one in which the lack of morality results in the undesirable outcomes for its characters. Take, for example, Jackson's characterization of street literature texts as cautionary tales: "Urban writers, while titillating readers with graphic depictions of sex and violence, offer a new twist on the Everyman morality tale" that "[w]hen carefully crafted ... caution[s] readers about lives full of misplaced swagger and devoid of greater purpose" (671). It is true that much of street literature deals in tales of crime and violence, a point many readers concede, but the narratives produced by women in the genre have as much to do with interpersonal relationships as they do with the streets. Jackson is not alone in her assessment of the consequences of bad behaviour in the so-called morality tales. In an entry in the *Encyclopedia of Hip-Hop Literature*, Mary Loving Blanchard pejoratively refers to the characters in Woods's novel as inhabiting "the seamy underbelly of society" (261). Blanchard suggests that Woods has made efforts to reconcile such "seamy" representations of Black urban life with philanthropic endeavours, such as providing scholarships to urban youths interested in journalism and the literary arts (Blanchard 261-2). The use of this moralistic language in scholarly criticism of street literature draws attention to the scholarly difficulty many face when trying to analyze texts that routinely fail to adhere to—or altogether ignore—class, race, and gender-based notions of propriety and respectability.

The representation of criminality in street literature and hip-hop culture more generally must be understood within the context of African American social status in American culture. Jonathan Munby situates the criminal self-images prevalent in some

elements of rap music and many street literature texts as “part of a legacy of race rebellion” (4). He argues that “understanding the provenance of today’s postindustrial, media-hijacking image of the African American outlaw or gangsta helps overcome historical amnesia about how such self-representation is part of a rich and long-established vernacular response to being ‘othered’ in white America” (5). Though Munby’s critique focuses almost solely on masculine “badman” representations in popular culture, I find his description of the historicized crafting of a rule-violating identity theoretically useful to my analysis of Black women’s troublesome articulations in their moment in culture. Paul Gilroy is wisely wary of uncritical celebrations of hip-hop, now a global popular culture, as being marginal or revolutionary; he challenges critics who “who broker and cheerlead for rebel cultures even as they melt down into attractively packaged pseudo-rebellion” to consider the political and ethical dilemmas of doing so (179). As Munby qualifies, not all elements of rap or hip-hop fit as part of a rebellious legacy. It seems as though Gilroy’s overall vision of hip-hop as a co-opted culture shares some of the tendencies Iton points to in his response to claims of hip-hop’s depoliticization on the basis of valuing certain forms of political engagement. Gilroy is especially suspicious of touting hip-hop as revolutionary when, as he claims, it has been heavily commercialized and “white consumers currently support this black culture” (181).¹⁰

¹⁰ Gilroy does not cite or refer to any statistics or sources for this assertion. Statistics tracking the race of hip-hop consumers have been a topic of debate for many years but the generally accepted “truth” is that the majority of consumers identify as white (see <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB111521814339424546> for more about this debate). In the case of street literature, sales of the genre are not kept in strict fashion;

At the same time, Gilroy argues that the performance of certain hip-hop and R&B artists (Lil' Kim included) who centralize Black heterosexual intimacy can be “analyzed as an alternative articulation of freedom that associates autonomous agency with sexual desire and promotes the symbolic exercise of power in the special domain that sexuality provides” (197). Despite mentioning a handful of women artists, Gilroy’s analysis is limited to Black male performers, leaving the work of Black women performers and the importance of gender within the politics of performance under-analyzed as counters to what he calls “revolutionary conservatism” (180). It is a central premise of hip-hop feminism and of this thesis that, although critics like Gilroy may argue that the days of hip-hop as a radical musical form are gone, the cultural work of Black women in particular remains a site for analyses of how normative and oppressive notions of gender, sexuality, and race have been or should be disrupted.

In particular, street literature writers like Woods and Souljah highlight what is at stake in the deployment of respectability politics for hip-hop generation women attempting to make sense of their lived experiences. Both *True to the Game* and *The Coldest Winter Ever* articulate versions of Black women’s experiences that are at odds with normative representations and expectations of gender and sexuality, resulting in the crafting of each protagonist as a hip-hop era “bad girl” figure similar to the kind of masculine figure noted by Munby. Initially, respectability politics were adopted as a form

however, both bookstore owners note that their clientele is primarily Black and, with the exception of their shipping to prison program, being physically present in the bookstore spaces is, for the most part, necessary to have access to the books. This differs from the distribution of hip-hop music in the era of cassettes, compact discs, and now digital music forms.

of resistance to the negative stereotypes and caricatures about the morality of Black women. Despite intending to work against these “controlling images” (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 67), respectability politics too easily lend themselves to the support of a racist and sexist definition of Black womanhood that also relegates discussions of Black women’s sexuality to the realm of silence, even within intimate spheres.¹¹ The works of Woods, Souljah, and Lil’ Kim all offer examples of transgressing respectability politics within Black and larger public spheres. Spectacle is one tool of publicity that is deployed in an effort to draw attention to public spheres that tend to exclude Black women from their view. These women have had some success in re-shaping discourse about Black women’s sexuality but, as Pough notes, “Spectacle is limited because it works only as long as the group attempting to impact the public sphere controls the gaze” (30). The signification of each of their representations of Black womanhood shifts according to the identity of the looker who is tasked with decoding the representation before them. I want to challenge assumptions about the gaze within public spheres by offering an alternative analysis of the viewing, listening, and reading publics of hip-hop and street literature. Many scholars have noted that young Black women constitute the majority of readers for the genre.¹² According to Herman Beaver, the popularity of street literature requires that the texts “be understood as a manifestation of historical circumstance, as opposed to being simple matters of taste” (263). Beaver asks,

¹¹ The breaking of this culture of silence is the subject of Tricia Rose’s *Longing to Tell: Black Women Talk About Sexuality and Intimacy* (New York: Picador, 2004).

¹² See Beaver, Sweeney, Hill, Perez, and Irby, for example.

[Can] a novel by an African American woman writer, whose readers have heard about it at a hair appointment or during a church or club gathering, be taken seriously as an instrument that furthers the project of liberation? Do texts which make the achievement of sexual pleasure or material and emotional well-being central to the plot create the grounds for resistance? (264)

By highlighting that popular culture can represent contradictory and partial forms of cultural resistance, Beaver concludes that such plots are “on a dialectical grid” where “transgression and utopia are central to an understanding of what and how popular texts mean” (264-5). Building from Beaver’s conclusion, I suggest that such texts can further a project of liberation from the constraints of gender-based oppression specific to Black women by highlighting or even demonstrating “misogynoir,” a term coined by CFC member Moya Bailey to describe “the particular brand of hatred directed at black women in American visual & popular culture” (Bailey). The ability to find and articulate pleasure and a sense of well-being in a culture that repeatedly denies it to you is surely a project of liberation.

The Troublesome Voice as a Challenge to ‘Exclusionary Violence’

Since the earliest beginnings of this project, I have wanted to account for and be accountable to a Black public sphere. When preparing my author biography for my first academic publication as a Masters student in the “Politics and Performativity” issue of *Michigan Feminist Studies*, well before I had any intention of pursuing further graduate study, I wrote the following to an editor for my author biography: “Marquita believes that theory and criticism should forge and maintain a relationship with readers outside of exclusively academic circles and hopes to continue researching and writing to reach

wider communities.” Six years later, hearing and listening to those outside of the academy remains a critical part of my academic self. I choose not to speak to or for “the Black community”—I write *with* a community that is alive, thoughtful, and, as this project highlights, able to speak for itself. The contributions of those I have interviewed for this project are meaningful and forceful; their input has been critical to the way I theorize a Black public sphere and this project serves as a testament to the power and importance of those voices.

In the growing body of scholarship on street literature, there is a lack of work on the intertextuality of hip-hop music and street literature and the dialogic nature of their listening and reading publics. Collins notes this trans-generic engagement, stating, “Through relationships with one another, music, and literature, African-American women create self-valuations that challenge externally defined notions of Black womanhood” (*Black Feminist Thought* 107). Here, I offer an analysis of the intersectional discursive contributions of Black women’s street literature texts, hip-hop music, and consumers and participants of hip-hop culture. This project incorporates ethnography, literary criticism, and cultural studies to document and validate an embodied, culturally-specific knowledge generated by the creative work of Black women. Moreover, in this project, I offer the following for field discussions of hip-hop culture: 1) I perform close readings of street literature texts to highlight specific tendencies of hip-hop aesthetics that inform narrative content and structure; 2) I analyze both hip-hop music and literature as part of a collective genre of Black cultural production, one that is in dialogic engagement with dominant literary and cultural discourse; and 3) I reveal how narratives produced in hip-

hop culture inform and are informed by the intersectional, lived experiences of their consumers.

Recent scholarship by Kenneth Warren (2011) has highlighted the historic desire for African American literature to “do” something as part of advancing a racial project. A main objective of my project is to interrogate this cultural mandate and its minimizing effect on the critical possibilities of hip-hop (feminist) cultural forms. I situate street literature within the tradition of African American literature by highlighting the topical threads that run between canonical texts by writers like Hurston, Richard Wright, and Walker and the work of contemporary writers like Woods and Sister Souljah. I intervene in the field of African American literature and culture by performing readings of popular texts that analyze the elements of critique within the vernacular language of street literature and hip-hop performance and within the space of Black-owned bookstores. The texts explored are imperfect and, as my analysis will demonstrate, these flaws or failures reveal some of the limitations of hip-hop culture and its producers, particularly around issues of sexuality and gender. Yet, there is still much to be learned from limited responses to an imperfect world. By integrating theories of hip-hop feminism and critical race studies into an analysis of street literature and hip-hop music, this project argues that these women’s works demonstrate the possibilities in and through popular African American expressive culture to trouble understandings of what Black feminism for the hip-hop generation is or can become.

Chapter Overview

My first chapter provides a critical overview of the history of street literature with a focus on gender, the conditions of street literature production within largely urban centers, and an analysis of Woods's *True to the Game* (1994). I outline what I consider to be a scholarly disengagement with street literature based largely on concerns about the narratives it reproduces and a presumed lack of literary merit. I argue that the "trouble" with such texts lies within matters of class and respectability politics particular to the subject position of young Black women, the genre's largest reading audience. With this context in place, I perform a textual analysis of Woods's novel to reveal how street literature texts explicitly address the concerns of young Black women in a language that is self-reflexive and critical of the life challenges faced by its characters.

This history provides the critical and social context for Chapter Two, where I analyze fieldwork interviews I completed about street literature reading culture in Black-owned bookstores. The interviews show the bookstores to be discursive meeting spaces with the power to attract people seeking knowledge, community, escape, and to participate in critical world building. In this chapter, I also reflect on my own role as a researcher investigating a community of which I am both a part and apart from with reference to feminist methodology for ethnography. My analysis addresses issues of race, gender, and class in literary and cultural critique while documenting community members' ideas on street literature and hip-hop culture.¹³

¹³ Ethics clearance documentation for this chapter, including sample questions, is included in the appendices section.

Chapter Three explores the contradictions and complexities that can arise when representing the troublesome voice, which can be simultaneously oppressed and oppressive. Through literary analysis of Souljah's memoir *No Disrespect* (1996) and her novel *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999), I trace the specific challenges and tensions present in her work that highlight how the lack of intersectionality in her political outlook, especially with regard to gender and sexuality, undermines her anti-racism activism. In her memoir *No Disrespect*, Sister Souljah writes, "I knew that if I could create characters and artists through radio, television, and film, who represented the values that I worked for, I could actually reach more children than it was possible to reach individual by individual" (315). One of these characters is her own activist persona in *The Coldest Winter Ever*. In this chapter, I unpack the representational trouble with such a fictionalized and idealized version of the self. While this narrative version of the self enacts a self-reflexive critique, it also limits an intersectional feminist project because of its inattention to the potentially alienating differences for subject positions that may overlap or diverge.

In my fourth and final chapter, I turn to representations of Black womanhood in popular music culture by offering a contextualized reading of the musical and visual productions of Lil' Kim—who I characterize as an anti-icon of Black womanhood—to demonstrate how meaning produced through language, sound, and vision of the Black female rapper can counter and reify stereotypes of blackness and womanhood.¹⁴ One of

¹⁴ Primary source archival materials from the Hip Hop Archive at Harvard University that address the publicity of black female rappers are referenced in Chapters Three and Four.

the most successful hip-hop artists of her time, Lil' Kim has sold millions of albums worldwide, been nominated for several awards for her solo performances, and won both Billboard and Grammy awards for her work. Lil' Kim's Recording Industry Association of America-certified double platinum debut *Hard Core* (1996) and *Notorious K.I.M.* (2000) serve as sonic and visual texts for analysis. With the rise of the music video form, increased attention was paid to the image of artists.¹⁵ Though the demand to have a marketable (i.e. sexually attractive) image reaches across gender lines, oftentimes female artists are placed under immense pressure to develop and maintain carefully crafted images to remain viable. The videos of Lil' Kim provide the grounds for exploration of the tensions between self-fashioning, beauty ideals and representations of sexuality in hip-hop and American popular culture more broadly. I suggest that her efforts in visual and sonic performance call attention to the predominance and illogicality of (white) beauty ideals and trouble the boundaries of Black womanhood constructed around notions of gender and sexuality. With brief reference to her collaboration with Missy Elliott, I offer a reading of their alliance that analyzes how both women defy the logic of patriarchal capitalism that requires constant competition of women in a male-dominated rap industry.

Each of these literary and musical texts works to show the possibilities and risks present in Black popular culture. Challenging stereotypical and hegemonic discourse

¹⁵ In the 1980s music videos developed as a promotional tool in response to a sagging record industry. Music Television (MTV), which debuted in 1981, provided a visual platform for mostly white rock artists and, in its early days, largely excluded black artists from its rotation. According to Andrew Goodwin, MTV followed the rules of the rock music business and its definition of rock music which were "the consequence of a long history of racism" (41).

about the signification of Black womanhood remains an important task within Black public spheres. By integrating hip-hop feminism and critical race studies into an analysis of street literature and hip-hop music, this project shows how these women's works enact the generative and critical possibilities as well as the risks and complications of the troublesome voice.

Chapter One - Teri Woods and the Street Literature Movement

The reality of popular culture was nothing new. The truth of the world landing on me daily, or hourly, was nothing I did not expect. But this book was a real slap in the face. It was like strolling through an antique mall, feeling good, liking the sunny day and then turning the corner to find a display of watermelon-eating, banjo-playing darkie carvings and a pyramid of Mammy cookie jars.

- Percival Everett, *Erasure*

In this pivotal scene in Percival Everett's 2001 satirical novel *Erasure*, the refined intellectual protagonist Thelonius "Monk" Ellison experiences a moment of immensely racialized shame, one that physically sickens him: the sight of a poster in a Borders bookstore advertising the novel *We's Lives in Da Ghetto* by Juanita Mae Jenkins. Monk happens upon the poster after searching for his own novel *Persians*. He finds his novel in the "African American Studies" section of the bookstore, which is an inaccurate categorization in his mind as "the only thing ostensibly African American was [his] jacket photograph" (Everett 28). Monk's book had not been selling and the Borders bookstore, as he sees it, is "taking food from his table" by boxing his book into a category of African American literature shared by the likes of Jenkins (28). As the subject of Monk's disdain, street literature books like the fictional *We's Lives in Da Ghetto* are castigated for offering stereotypical portrayals of Black Americans in the same way Black Sambo or Mammy figurines call to mind an explicitly racist history in popular culture. Seeing the poster for Jenkins's book and learning from his sister that the film rights for the novel were sold for three million dollars spark an anger in Monk that drives the plot of *Erasure*. Frustrated with his lack of financial success as a writer, Monk decides to write the kind of book he hates under a pen name. He writes *My Pafology*,

which he later changes to *Fuck*, and finally achieves the success he has longed for. By the novel's end, Monk has won a National Book Award for *Fuck* (which reads decidedly close to Richard Wright's *Native Son*) and declares,

I was a victim of racism by virtue of my failing to acknowledge [*sic*] racial difference and by failing to have my art be defined as an exercise in racial self-expression. So, I would not be economically oppressed because of writing a book that fell in line with the very books I deemed racist. (212)

As a black man with an economically comfortable middle-class upbringing whose own writing is devoid of explicit racial politics, Monk does not think about race in his everyday life. While he notes being stopped by police “once or twice” for being Black, race only becomes a serious problem when he is confronted by it in a racist publishing world. Monk had been exceptional in his academic success (he graduated *summa cum laude* from Harvard) and in the eyes of his family, particularly his father. In publishing, though, he is boxed in by his race—a troubling reality for a man who has been privileged and protected, for the most part, by his class status. Everett's allusive choice to imbed Wright's *Native Son* within his critique of a Black woman writer's employment of realist styles redirects Wright's critique of Zora Neale Hurston's representation of “the folk” toward *Native Son*—a lauded “race book.” By pitting these two canonical African American writers against one another, Everett teases out both notions of class and the burden of race representation as primary issues in literary production.

This chapter will offer an analysis of the importance of the street literature genre to the writing and reading publics of hip-hop generation Black women and problematize the criteria of critique—i.e. adherence to respectability politics of race and gender in

public representation—used against the genre. As a genre, street literature is often criticized for its representation of drug culture, sex, and street life. From a hip-hop feminist perspective, I argue that it is no coincidence that the subject of Monk's disapproval and source of his shame is a Black woman, for debates about street literature have much to do with gender and its intersections with race and class. The Black woman writer is always already racialized and gendered in ways that make her visibility troubling to public spheres that typically seek to limit her access on the basis of race and gender.

As this chapter will demonstrate, the dynamics of race, gender, and class intersect when considering street literature. I argue that the dismissal of street literature constitutes a significant example of how, within the space of cultural production and consumption, Black people are further marginalized by respectability politics that dictate a different and more demanding standard of being—one that leaves no room for imperfect responses to an even more imperfect world. In *Erasure*, Juanita Mae Jenkins, a satirical depiction of *Push* author Sapphire, is an Oberlin College-educated writer who bases her book on her experience of a few days in Harlem after deciding that contemporary African American stories needed telling.¹⁶ After his vomit-inducing moment of disgust at the sight of Jenkins's poster, Monk ponders his visceral reaction:

So why did Juanita Mae Jenkins send me running for the toilet? I imagine it was because Tom Clancy was not trying to sell his book to me by suggesting that the crew of his high-tech submarine was a representation

¹⁶ In my own reading, Everett's characterization of Jenkins immediately called to mind Sapphire. Other scholars like Susana Morris and Brittney Cooper, for example, have also picked up on the similarities between Everett's subject of criticism and the real-life success of Sapphire's *Push*.

of his race (however fitting a metaphor). Nor was his publisher marketing it in that way. If you didn't like Clancy's white people, you could go out and read about some others. (214)

Monk's words indicate that there is a dearth of fiction about the multiplicities of Black life because of the demands of publishers that seek a specific kind of race narrative.

However, a scan of any mainstream bookstore may tell a different story, one that includes a wider selection of Black writers creating Black characters than Monk here acknowledges. Depictions of street life are not merely creations of imagination and the tendency for street literature plots to mirror the experiences of their writers is not unusual. The problem of categorization within African American literature extends to the characterization of the writers. As Everett makes clear, Monk does not want to be labelled as an "African American writer" of any kind and his resistance to this label is tied to the kinds of non-racialized narratives he writes. Danyel Smith writes that the anger of what she calls "black-lit" authors is not solely directed at street literature authors:

They were and are distressed that the stories street-lit authors tell are so much the same as our 'Black' stories were seventy years ago. Regardless of the marches and assassinations and rallies and hard work and college educations and celebrated careers and boycotts and laws passed and laws rescinded, being Black in the United States since the Harlem Renaissance has not changed as much as we would have it in our collective dream. (191)

Smith argues that the trouble is with the sameness of the Black American condition, both in reality and fictional depictions, and Everett exemplifies her point with his reworking of a twentieth-century canonical text by Wright in his attempt to parody *Push* and street literature more broadly.

Through its hyperbolic tendencies, Everett's novel raises important questions about the marketing of literature and representation. For Monk and other literary writers, as well as critics of the street literature genre, many of their concerns arise out of the presence at all of street literature texts within mainstream bookstores, often as a result of their publication by a major publishing house. Consequently, street literature debates are not merely about countering racialized stereotypes; they also include concerns about the adherence to distinctly middle-class values, how reading audiences are consuming such texts, and how such reading publics are composed across racial lines. It follows that this historical sameness carries with it a desire to revisit or maintain the strategies of the past for those invested in fighting racism through respectability politics. In *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham outlines "the politics of respectability" (186) as a group of discursively contested strategies regarding honor, self-respect, piety, and propriety deployed to promote racial uplift and women's rights and to secure broader access to the public sphere (186). Originally intended as a way to assert the humanity of Black people and especially Black women, respectability politics, however, have become a hindrance for progressive, intersectional projects. As Susana Morris explains,

Respectability politics ... grows out of a complicated and intertwined set of political histories and prerogatives that are concerned with improving conditions for Blacks but that also employ tactics such as surveillance, control, and repression; that provide insufficient political gains; and that ultimately secure the hegemony of ruling social structures. (8)

For street literature writers and readers, the constant reminders of their blackness and the marginalization that comes with it inform their narrative choices. Street writing and

culture demonstrates a desire to confront the imperfect world with narratives that fictively depict not only urban tragedy but also triumph in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds.

In this chapter, I will explore the history of street literature as a genre and its male-dominated tradition in order to contextualize the significance of Black women writers like Teri Woods. Next, I will analyze Woods's debut novel, *True to the Game*, to highlight how street literature texts use hip-hop aesthetics to represent issues relevant to the lives of young Black women, such as the drug trade, class ascendancy, and sexual violence, and make the argument that these everyday concerns are the problem, not their description in the texts themselves. The tools of hip-hop feminism provide a framework for theorizing the tension produced by such representations as “percussive” in their “disruptive and generative” qualities (Durham, Cooper and Morris 724). Given the prevalence of such themes within the genre and its resonance with readers who are not merely reading for voyeuristic pleasure but may often share such experiences quite closely, I ask, what are the implications of focusing on the social imagination in and around street literature for understanding its popularity? As I will demonstrate, Woods's career illustrates the drive necessary for making a name within the historically masculine genre and also raises important questions about the continuation of certain problematic publishing practices, all of which offer necessary context for critiques of street literature production. Finally, the last section of this chapter will consider the future implications of street literature for African American popular and literary cultures today.

Recalling Street Literature's History and Context

The tradition of street literature has tended to privilege masculine voices as the foundational figures of the genre including male writers such as Chester Himes, whose Harlem Detective series was published from 1957 to 1969, Iceberg Slim aka Robert Beck (first published in 1967), and Donald Goines (first published in 1971) (Gifford 4). Only in the 1990s did women writers become major innovators within the genre. My attention here is directed to these emergent voices of women writing street literature as voices that trouble the water of male-dominated spaces. Just as hip-hop has, since its inception, benefited from the work of (Black) women, so have street literature and the bookstores that line their shelves with it. Today some of the most successful writers within the genre are women and, according to Marc Lamont Hill, Biany Perez, and Decoteau J. Irby, “African American women are the books’ primary authors” (77). The street literature of today looks similar to the Black pulp fiction of yesteryear with a few important exceptions. Black women writers, as Justin Gifford suggests, have rewritten many of the representations of “pimps, players, revolutionaries, and writers” to “give voice and agency to female characters” (154). As I will demonstrate, this departure from the norms associated with the genre in its male-dominated early years has created a new space. Within this space, women with otherwise limited representational access to public discourse have been given a voice.

Examining the social history of street literature is a fundamental step toward understanding the conditions of its production. Street literature or Black urban popular fiction is historically rooted in the 1970s, coinciding with the popularity of Blaxploitation

films, which often featured Black protagonists overcoming racist white villains, and the beginning of what then-president Richard Nixon coined the “War on Drugs.” In *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, legal scholar Michelle Alexander thoroughly historicizes the War on Drugs by detailing how the policies comprising its legal framework preceded many of the social conditions it is often popularly assumed to have been in response to, including the crack cocaine epidemic. Though Nixon started the War on Drugs, the Reagan administration seized the moral panic around the 1985 crack cocaine epidemic in inner cities as a political opportunity. As Alexander details, “The Reagan administration hired staff to publicize the emergence of crack cocaine in 1985 as part of a strategic effort to build public and legislative support for the war” (5). This media campaign to demonize crack cocaine as an especially dangerous drug made way for the passage of discriminatory federal legislation such as the now-infamous “100-to-1 ratio,” which, as Alexander notes, punished crack offenses one hundred times more severely than offenses involving powder cocaine (112).¹⁷ The War on Drugs legislation, though “cloaked in race-neutral language” (Alexander 54), continues to lead to discriminatory punishment that often falls most heavily on bodies of colour, especially Black bodies.

¹⁷ Under the Obama administration, Congress passed the Fair Sentencing Act (FSA) in 2010, which reduced the sentencing disparity between crack and powder cocaine offenses from the 100-to-1 ratio to 18-to-1. In 2011, the U.S. Sentencing Commission furthered these efforts by voting to retroactively apply the new FSA sentencing guidelines to those sentenced before the law’s enactment (One Hundred Eleventh Congress of the United States of America). Though such steps have made significant strides to eliminate sentencing disparity, the fact remains that the punishment for offenses involving the same drug, albeit in two different forms, are still unequal. See <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-111s1789enr/pdf/BILLS-111s1789enr.pdf> for FSA details.

Such punishment extends beyond the legal consequences that are tied directly to the penal system; the War on Drugs has deep implications for the educational system as well. Law professors Eric Blumenson and Eva S. Nilsen credit the War on Drugs with creating a proxy war on education that has created and perpetuated an underclass in America contributing to the cyclical limiting of educational and class ascendancy possibilities for populations who cannot afford private education (63). For example, U.S. federal student aid guidelines indicate that convictions for selling or possessing illegal drugs may adversely affect a student's eligibility for educational aid, including grants, loans, or work-study. The only other criminal offense that can affect eligibility is a "forcible or nonforcible sexual offense" and such an offense will only affect eligibility for Federal Pell Grants (Federal Student Aid: An Office of the U.S. Dept. of Education). The widespread and lasting effects of the policies of the War on Drugs, such as voting disenfranchisement and ineligibility to receive public assistance (including food stamps and public housing), have discernibly shaped the lives of inner-city residents.¹⁸

Given the prevalence of drug dealing and addiction in urban communities and high rates of drug-related imprisonment, the centrality of the drug trade to much of the street literature emerging at this time is an expected occurrence. Both Goines and Beck feature storylines focused on the drug trade. In both cases, their lived experiences

¹⁸ In February 2014, U.S. Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr. called for states to "fundamentally reconsider laws that permanently disenfranchise people who are no longer under federal or state supervision." In a public speech, Holder made explicit the connection between contemporary disenfranchisement of felons and the laws of post-Reconstruction states meant to prevent black people from voting. See Adam Goldman, "Eric Holder makes case for felons to get voting rights back," *Washington Post*, February 11, 2014: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/eric-holder-makes-case-for-felons-to-get-voting-rights-back/2014/02/11/b0556492-932b-11e3-84e1-27626c5ef5fb_story.html.

undoubtedly authenticated their tales for readers attracted to their books as Goines was open about his drug addiction and Beck was rumoured to be a pimp. In his article “From *Dopefiend* to *Kenyatta’s Last Hit*: The Angry Black Crime Novels of Donald Goines,” Greg Goode describes Goines as “largely unknown to white readers” despite being the most popular Black writer in America (41). Goode credits the start of Goines’s writing career to an encounter with the work of Beck, “founder of the Black experience novel,” while imprisoned (42).¹⁹ For both Beck and Goines, the drug trade shaped their fictional worlds in ways that rang true for their readers.

The inklings of a critical race analysis of the conditions for Black Americans are evident in portions of Goines’s work. Goines was not an intellectual in any traditional sense of the term, but he was clearly interested in offering a way into discourse about the plight of segments of Black urban populations. In his writing, Goines is quite clear in his gestures toward a greater understanding of the institutional challenges faced by Black people in America. He avoids simply glorifying urban predicaments by inserting into his texts brief critical race analyses of the institutional racism Black people often face in different aspects of everyday life, regardless of their social standing. In one example Black, presumably middle-class, teachers stand silently as police roughly arrest a young Black girl because “they could and would be handled the same way if they so much as opened their mouths” (Goines 60). Such fictional scenarios in Goines’s work suggest that

¹⁹ Goines’s and Beck’s works are often described by scholars and critics as “black experience novels.” I am hesitant to use that phrase because of its flattening of black experiences to a monolithic one. Indeed, Goines and other writers of the genre speak to particular experiences of black urbanites but they do not represent the entirety of such communities.

race tends to have greater influence than money or class in many encounters, particularly with the state, because race is seen first and foremost.

The Literary Response to Street Literature

In *What Was African American Literature?* Kenneth Warren writes that Black popular fiction is read mainly by (using the words of Langston Hughes) “ordinary Negroes” (110). For a scholar like myself interested in the everydayness of public spaces like the urban bookstore or barbershop/salon, street literature is a particularly salient point of entry into discussions of Black popular culture’s relation to everyday life. Warren’s text traces the genealogy of street literature back to its predecessors, Goines and Beck, whom Warren suggests appealed to some readers who found their flouting of social norms a “true politically dynamic ‘resistance’ culture” (113). To give a sense of the literary critique of street literature, Warren quotes from a now infamous *New York Times* op-ed cheekily titled “Their Eyes Were Reading Smut” penned by Nick Chiles, a writer of literary fiction. In his piece, Chiles, much like the fictional Monk, admits to feeling ashamed of the street literature texts that are now, in his words, signaling “the crossover of this genre to mainstream bookstores” (Chiles). It is precisely the move of street literature from an alternate public sphere, the local urban bookstore, to a dominant chain that causes such concern over representation. Although street literature is largely sold in independent bookstores like the ones I visited, the occasional mainstream publishing success of a writer like Sapphire draws attention to the genre and its audience.²⁰ As

²⁰ Chapter Two details my fieldwork in the bookstores Black and Nobel of Philadelphia, PA and Source of Knowledge of Newark, NJ.

Chiles's increasing anxiety upon seeing the street literature texts brushing up against the literary fiction in mainstream bookstores reveals, slippage between the two spheres creates new issues of concern for literary-based racial projects.

Critiques of street literature are discursively shaped by anxieties about gender and sexuality. Chiles's gender bias is evident in the distinct leveling of his critique at young Black women, which makes the titling of his essay as a reference to Hurston's canonical novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* – and his description of the genre as “almost exclusively pornography for black women” (Chiles) – a distinctly sanctimonious critique. He goes as far as anthropomorphizing the books, referring to them as “nasty books ... pairing off back in the stockrooms like little paperback rabbits and churning out even more graphic offspring that make Ralph Ellison books cringe into a dusty corner” (Chiles). His likening of the proliferation of street literature texts to shame-inducing animalistic reproduction calls to mind tropes of the lasciviousness of Black people and stereotypes of irresponsible or otherwise pathological Black mothers, which Dorothy Roberts refers to in *Killing the Black Body* as the “degradation of Black motherhood” (154). Chiles's reliance on such racist and sexist tropes reveals the extent to which caricatures of Black motherhood that blame poor Black mothers “for perpetuating social problems by transmitting defective genes, irreparable crack damage, and a deviant lifestyle to their children” (Roberts 3) shape perceptions of young Black women (readers of street literature) who, according to the expectations of gender, are assumed to be future mothers. The hip-hop generation has felt the wrath of the War on Drugs and the crack epidemic through its punitive policies and the resultant political framing of blackness as

inherently degraded. Therefore, the focus of street literature on the consequences of the drug trade—both predicted and unanticipated—prompts the critical impulse to locate the cause of societal ills within the body of work that highlights the problems. Within this context and alongside the fact that most street literature texts are produced by Black women, I find the implicitly gendered nature of Chiles's indictment to be quite steeped in respectability politics that both denigrate and deny Black women's freedom of expression, sexuality, and pleasure.

Warren argues that Chiles's objections to the genre being marketed as African American literature are both "moralistic and economic" (111). Warren also notes that this longstanding frustration on the part of serious writers and critics is partly because of their inability to shape the taste of audiences (112). In "What is African American Literature?," Gerald Early attempts, for the most part, to offer a more compassionate assessment of the reading culture of street literature's audience of predominantly young, urban Black women. He suggests that even though street literature texts can be read as realism (as they often are), "they are actually about fantasy, as their readers are attempting to understand their reality while trying to escape it" (Early). He gestures toward an understanding of the reading act as a theoretical working through of real-world existence. The real-world context of high illiteracy and high school drop-out rates contrasts with the sizeable Black reading audience, which Early notes is large enough that "a black author can write to it exclusively without giving a thought to being highbrow or literary or to crossing-over for whites." Street literature is a market-driven literature, meaning that its writers rely on the support of their audience rather than the patronization

of those readers Early refers to as “cultured whites and blacks.” This distinction calls to mind Hurston’s declaration that her writing was meant to give African Americans “something of our own,” allowing space for freedom of creativity, imagination, and the ability to write free from the burden of political utility (Hemenway 207). Early sees both sides of the debate: on one hand, there is the issue of respectability; on the other is the democratizing effect the genre has had. He is being quite frank when he admits that the texts are often “trashy, poorly written novels,” but he also suggests that the books “reveal some of the complicated roots of African-American literature and of the construction of the African-American audience” (Early). As a compromise, Early suggests reserving the “African American literature” label for literary texts and calling the popular texts “Black Urban Fiction” or “Afro-Pop Fiction.” Each term carries a critical weight, and Early is correct in assuming that “African American literature” calls to mind a particular canon. In this project, I commit to using “street literature” precisely because of its flexibility in accounting for the racial and ethnic diversity within urban populations and registering the realist character of the genre.

The street literature debate has been largely concerned with literary categorization. Warren spends the bulk of *What Was African American Literature?* arguing for moving the discourse beyond what he considers to be an outdated mode of literary categorization. The following passage best summarizes his argument as it relates to the issues raised by Chiles and Early:

Although Early’s optimism places him apart from Chiles, the two arguments put forth by both men are really of a piece. Early’s desire to

bridge the divide between urban lit and serious lit by using the appeal of a popular author to cultivate the tastes of mass-market readers is driven by the same discomfort (in a less panicked mode) that besets Chiles. He wants the readers of urban lit to upgrade their tastes, at least on occasion, and he would very much like to find Best African American Fiction on the shelves alongside Nikki Turner's novels because he thinks that "good" literature has a shot with this audience, provided he can get them to pick some up. (116)

As Warren suggests here, both Chiles and Early view street literature as geared to a lowest common denominator—and at best as a stepping stone into the canon of great African American literature. This idea assumes that canonical texts are, or at least should be, the priority and/or goal of all readers.

The precursors to street literature reveal that it is not merely a pathway into the canon but, instead, a genre that has its own dedicated readership. In a 2004 *Publishers Weekly* article entitled "Street Lit: Readers Gotta Have It," Judith Rosen credits the rise of "urban African-American fiction" to the "unusual confluence of hip-hop culture, cheap softcover printing and, according to former John Wiley editor Earl Cox, the burgeoning prison population" (31). As Rosen claims, "Trade paperback street lit editions sell most to black women and girls between the ages of 13 and 30" and are read by an "even more elusive and desirable demographic group: young black men" (32). Though a study about the reading habits of young Black men could offer valuable insight, I am choosing to focus on the larger reading demographic of young Black women.

The cultural implications of street literature for gender and sexuality are critical to this project's concern with representations of Black womanhood. In "Ghetto Fabulous: Reading Black Adolescent Femininity in Urban Street Fiction," Simone Gibson,

Elizabeth Marshall and Jeanine Staples examine the reception of street literature by its largest reading demographic of young Black women. They argue, “Urban street fiction provides readers, especially girls, with complex representations of Black femininity that can be taken up in a variety of ways” (28). Their treatment of the genre is attentive to the use value of a widely disparaged form of literature (which resembles the treatment of youth cultures generally) and serves as an important early step in the development of a “meaningful feminist pedagogy” that “includes a respect for these texts and correspondent literacy practices” (Gibson, Marshall and Staples 35), which my work here builds on.

Similarly, in their analysis of street literature’s engagement with feminism, Beauty Bragg and David Ikard connect street literature to “black feminist efforts to theorize gender experiences in the post-civil rights era” (237):

[W]e understand these texts to do the following: (1) extend the concern of traditional feminist theorizing with the quest for female independence; (2) engage the contradictions of feminist theory and practice engendered by individual sexual desire articulated by hip hop feminists; and (3) offer provocative representations of black men that correlate with black male feminism’s concern with examining family structures and challenging the reproduction of rigid definitions of black masculinity. (237-8)

Though Bragg and Ikard find room for feminist analysis within street literature, they are careful to avoid endorsement of the problematic aspects of the genre. Their article pays a wealth of attention to the ‘Bitch’ archetype, which they find “works to reify the trope of male power, figured in terms of active consumption of passive females, instead of disrupting the dynamic of transactional sexuality” (245). Transactional sexuality, which

commodifies race and social relations, relies on exchange (often of sex, money, or power) and largely frames heterosexual romance in urban fiction (Bragg and Ikard 239). Bragg and Ikard's analysis attends to the complexity of transactional sexuality in hip-hop culture, demonstrating how a serious consideration of the gender and sexuality politics of street literature can offer new understandings relevant to contemporary Black feminist thought. Urban fiction, or street literature in the terms of my dissertation, participates in the "political project" of functioning as a legitimate voice of African American women's political thought by "engaging the lived experience of black womanhood in the context of transactional sexuality" (Bragg and Ikard 241). As such, my project continues the historical practice of respecting African American women's literature as a "legitimate voice for African American women's [political] thought" (Collins, *From Black Power to Hip Hop* 176).

Teri Woods: An Emergent Voice

The work of Teri Woods demonstrates one form that politicized thought can take on in hip-hop culture. Woods's novel *True to the Game* (1994) follows a coming-of-age narrative structure, telling the story of a young Black woman, Gena, as she attempts to make her way in love and life through the perils of a rough urban setting. Philadelphia is the place where Woods began to lay the foundation for her writing career, writing *True to the Game* while working as a secretary for a downtown law firm. She spent six years trying to get her book published by major publishing houses. Having been denied entry to the publishing world through this route, Woods struck out on her own, self-publishing her book in 1994 under her own company, Meow Meow Productions, and selling it "hand to

hand” and “from the trunk of her car” on the streets of New York (Teri Woods Publishing).

In the growing body of scholarship published about street literature, few have taken up Woods, focusing instead on the works of Vicki Stringer, Nikki Turner, or Sister Souljah.²¹ This project thus fills a gap by paying attention to Woods’s contributions during the re-emergence of the street literature genre in the mid-to-late nineties.²² Her origin story is an example of the entrepreneurial spirit of street literature, one often borne out of necessity. Though Philadelphia figures heavily in her work as the city in which she was raised, Harlem was the place where she was able to sell her books and create connections that would benefit her growing career. After building her name and profile as a writer, Woods started Teri Woods Publishing, eventually republishing *True to the Game* in 2007 and her subsequent books across multiple platforms, including e-books, print on demand, and trade paperback with Hachette Book Group.²³

Woods’s career represents the beginning of an industry-changing movement that would eventually thrust street literature into the view of major publishing houses. *True to the Game* was one of the texts that attracted and energized readers who had not been

²¹ Though Brittney Cooper suggests that *Push* (1996) “predates the rise of hip-hop or street literature by several years” (55), I would add that Woods’s novel also comes before the rise—which is marked by Souljah’s 1999 novel—though not with the same level of visibility as *Push*.

²² For chronological details about the post-World War II development of black crime literature or early street literature, see Justin Gifford’s *Pimping Fictions: African American Crime Literature and the Untold Story of Black Pulp Publishing* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013).

²³ Hachette Book Group boasts some of the most popular contemporary writers including Stephenie Meyer, David Sedaris and J.K. Rowling. Woods’s success was solidified, finally, with her presence on the New York Times Bestsellers list for trade fiction in November 2007.

sought after or even considered as readers by mainstream publishing culture and Black literary circles. *True to the Game* serves as a primary text for this project in multiple ways: in addition to its place as one of the earliest texts in the re-emergence of street literature, it is also remarkable in its production by a Black woman—a huge departure from the trend of street literature being written and published by men. Woods’s debut novel was published almost twenty-five years after Goines’s *Black Girl Lost* (1973), one of the earliest popular urban texts to take on the perspective of a female character. In his novel, Goines writes the story of a young Black girl coming of age in the most terrible of urban conditions. This text features many of the plot turns and twists now so often associated with contemporary street literature and serves as a prototype for much of the genre. His attempt to explore a Black girl’s subjectivity is described in the blurb on the book’s back cover as the tale of a young Black girl who “discovered love and affection...and rape and murder!” Goines’s text manages to put Sandra, the protagonist, in the face of nearly every danger associated with girls and urban life. The use of exclamation marks signals how this novel was marketed—as a thrilling way to experience these urban horrors specific to the vulnerable Black female body without leaving behind your own comforts as a reader. This marketing strategy often figures into critiques of the genre that characterize street literature as “pathology porn.” This term draws out a criticism of non-urban readers who take voyeuristic pleasure in reading such tales from the safety of suburban life far removed from assumed urban dangers.²⁴ The

²⁴ A similar critical debate has focused on the consumption of hip-hop music by white, suburban youth. See Bakari Kitwana, *Why Whites Kids Love Hip Hop: Wankstas, Wiggers, Wannabes, and the New Reality of Race in America*, New York: Basic Civitas Books (2006) and Murray Forman, *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press (2002).

distancing allowed by such reading practices can often add to the reliance on stereotypes, since readers, especially those without any other evidence of the diversity of urban experiences, may come away from such texts with the idea that these fictional narratives confirm their already assumed negative beliefs about urban life and urban residents, particularly those of colour.

Early in his novel, Goines establishes that Sandra is “a product of circumstances, which had been hard and were still hard” (28) with a drunk mother who does not look after her. The theme of the broken home and pathological Black mother is revisited at the novel’s end as a plausible reason for the hardships Sandra faces with an arresting police officer stating, “You can’t help but wonder why all the ghetto children don’t turn out bad” (Goines 165). This line is echoed in *True to the Game* when Woods writes, “A whole generation sat back, and said, ‘Fuck it. I’m not gonna raise my kids.’ Hence the saga began” (6). Goines’s attempt to highlight how urban plights can affect young Black girls was an unusual plot as most Black popular or pulp fiction at that time was written by and largely about young Black men, especially in Goines’s work. Consequently, Woods’s arrival at the turn of the twenty-first century opened up the sphere of authorship and allowed for different perspectives of urban experiences that place the concerns of young Black women—in all their complexity—at the forefront of cultural production, making a hip-hop feminist analysis both possible and necessary.

True to the Game: A Hip-Hop Romance

The story in *True to the Game* follows the life of Gena, a young woman from the Philadelphia projects who meets and falls in love with the man of her dreams, Quadir, a

millionaire drug dealer. The narrative adheres to street literature's generic models of storytelling with a focus on love (or a lack of love) and relationships, bringing together the styles of hip-hop and the wider body of women's romance writing. The novel crystallizes the hip-hop-influenced style and content that other street literature texts would follow. Brittney Cooper outlines the hip-hop aesthetic: "First, it uses a kind of social alchemy that transforms lack into substance. ... Second, hip-hop music and cultural expression privilege a well-honed facility for defiance ... Finally, hip-hop aesthetics privilege street consciousness and cultural literacy" (56). *True to the Game* is built on a foundation of street consciousness and cultural literacy, as its title implies. Its characters also privilege defiance, whether it be rebelliousness toward authority figures or ignoring friends offering counsel. The aesthetic quality of creating substance from lack is one of the most salient in *True to the Game*. In the text, Gena uses the written word in a poetic form to express her feelings of desire within the narrative. As she drafts her poems, the directness in her words and the adherence to rhythmic structures infuse a musical feel into the page, bringing her longing for Quadir to life in a style that would resonate with hip-hop generation readers.

As an author, Woods adds to the hip-hop aesthetic by bookending the novel with poetic pieces that offer gritty context and, later, moralization. *True to the Game* begins with a lyrically dramatic prologue called "Game Anthem," in which she writes,

As you creep through the streets, the crack fiends holler. They've done any and everything just to give you those dollars. I hope it will last. I hope you make something of it. Time will tell if something good can come from it. But as you count the highs, count the lows too, and whatever you do,

forever remain true. What choice do you have? It's in you by nature. Your only fault is...Being a player. (n.p.)

The rhyme pattern and poetic tempo of these lines enables a rhythmic reading; the title (“Game Anthem”) reiterates that this is meant to be sung or read musically. Woods’s ominous prologue enlightens readers to the fiendish horrors that lurk in the streets, hints at the fickleness of a success built from the profits of the drug trade, and warns that low times will also come. At this point, it is unclear exactly what “true” means but the speech, as directed to “you,” assumes readers to have some knowledge or understanding of the nature to which it refers. Together, the privileging of street knowledge and textually outlined hip-hop musicality make *True to the Game*’s hip-hop aesthetic clear.

Told from an omniscient narrative point of view, the novel cursorily covers the life and times of Gena from the age of seventeen to twenty, describing how she was raised in the Richard Allen housing projects by her grandmother, whom she calls Gah Git, and supported by her uncle who moved her out of the projects at seventeen and set her up with an apartment, rental car, and money (Woods 5-6). Gena, raised within a patriarchal system that dictates paternalistic actions, expects such material gestures as expressions of love and care from men in her life. This support allows Gena to develop a reliance on men to provide for her and ultimately, she becomes completely dependent on the goodwill of others. However, a feminist reading of this aspect of Woods’s narrative draws out the risks and imbalance of power in Gena’s dependency: Gena is expected to give something in return to those who provide her with material support. In her relationships with men, Gena makes use of what Bragg and Ikard describe as

“transactional sexuality” (245). Unlike outright prostitution, transactional sexuality is not looked down upon in the world of street literature. Instead, it is considered an admirable and accepted part of romantic or sexual relationships. As the narrative voice in *True to the Game* states, “The only way not to give the sisters their props was if they weren’t getting paper. Thoroughbreds of the streets. Getting money was what it was all about, and any way you could get it, you was supposed to” (7). Despite Gena’s poetic expression of sexual desire and agency, the novel suggests that, within the context of transactional sexuality, actual intimate encounters, which I later explain are marked by a restriction or removal of sexual agency, are not the source of pleasure; instead, the object of desire is money, and consumption is the source of pleasure.

The representation of transactional sexuality in street literature can be read as a manifestation of American consumer culture permeating interpersonal relationships. The similarities between the reception of multi-ethnic “chick lit” and street literature written by Black women reveal similar anxieties about popular fiction read largely by women.²⁵ In their article on multi-ethnic chick lit, Pamela Butler and Jigna Desai use a transnational feminist framework to challenge the assumption of chick lit as a “homogenously white normative genre to be read primarily for its relationship to feminism and femininity” and the consequential understanding of chick lit as an “‘apolitical’ genre driven by blind and uncritical consumerism and individualism” (2). By

²⁵ I would argue that chick lit, despite being critiqued as not real “literature,” is considered more middlebrow than street literature. There are considerations to be made about the issues of class at work in such distinctions. However, the notion of consumerism as a way to fulfill a longing to belong or obtain class mobility maintains prevalence across both genres.

focusing on chick lit about South Asian American women characters, Butler and Desai highlight what they call “neoliberal feminism,” which emphasizes individual choice to critique the binaries at work in the separation of “public from private, personal from political, consumption from production, and the cultural from the economic” (8). As they argue, “The ‘right to consume’ may be of significance to women of color as a way of negotiating racial, class, and gender inequities in relation to ethnic and national communities, as well as a way of claiming citizenship” (14). In both street literature and the multi-ethnic chick lit described by Butler and Desai, the act of “buying into” consumer culture as a way into the American polity can be an act that reveals how women of colour situate themselves within and against discourses of identity and identification.

The intersectionality of hip-hop feminism presents a framework through which to understand and analyze the seemingly contradictory messages embedded within street literature narratives and assertions of empowerment through greater representation. For example, throughout *True to the Game*, sex and sexuality function primarily as spaces for social advancement or material gain and figure into Gena’s summation of self-worth and belonging; however, they are also potential spaces of violence. Gena views her beauty or sexual appeal as both a gift and a curse—sometimes it allows her to escape harm while at other times it may seem to invite sexualized violence upon her. Early in the novel, Gena faces a man pointing a gun at her in what could have been a moment of mistaken identity or of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. She does not get shot and, in the moments after, comes to the conclusion that “her beauty saved her” (Woods 8). Gena’s

luck in escaping violence at the hands of a stranger, though, does not save her from sexual violence at the hands of her lovers. Gena fails to recognize such sexual violence as an assault against her and the lack of pleasure and even desire in many cases make the representation of sex in the text unsettling instead of erotic.

Without contextualization, the mere presence of sexual content in street literature is taken as “almost exclusively pornography for black women” (Chiles) instead of a representation of a young Black woman trying to make sense of what amounts to partner rape. In *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, Janice Radway explores the tendency of women readers of romance novels to be acquiescent to certain representations of violence but resistant to others. Her interviews with readers who patronize romance bookseller Dot offer significant insight into the rationalization processes readers employ when confronted with violent scenarios in novels. According to Radway, “Violence is acceptable to [Dot’s readers] if it is described sparingly, if it is controlled carefully, or if it is *clearly* traceable to the passion or jealousy of the hero” (76). Woods’s descriptions of Gena’s violent sexual encounters follow a similar logic, characterizing the brutality of the male perpetrators of sexual violence as being overwhelmed by their lust and jealousy for Gena. Of the handful of sexual encounters described in the novel, at least three of them are date rape. Gena’s first boyfriend Jamal aggressively pursues her, showing up at her apartment shortly after meeting her and forcing himself on her. As the narrator describes it, “He silenced her with a kiss and she knew her struggles were in vain; before she knew it, he was inside her” (12). Jamal’s actions are presented as an extreme act of jealousy after fighting with Gena about being

interested in other men. Because she “fear[s] that he would get mad and take back all he’d bought her” (12), she quiets herself long enough to get through the assault. Gena has a similar experience with Quadir, the so-called man of her dreams, when she tells him to stop kissing her, only for him to continue “holding her so tight that she couldn’t back away. All she could do was submit to him” (73). According to the parameters for violence outlined by Radway’s romance readers, readers of *True to the Game* may view Quadir’s assault as justifiable because he is overcome with passion for Gena, as the narrator declares he “kissed her in the mouth like he had never kissed anyone like this” (73). As Radway argues,

[S]uggesting that rape is either a mistake or an expression of uncontrollable desire ... may also give her [the heroine] a false sense of security by showing her how to rationalize violent behavior and thus reconcile her to a set of events and relations that she would be better off changing. (216)

Sex in Woods’s novel presents a complex representation that carries certain risks: both Gena’s ex-boyfriend and current boyfriend sexually violate her but, since their actions are characterized as being motivated by their tremendous desire for her, Gena and possibly readers, too, are able to view such encounters as normal or even enviable expressions of romance that ironically give them power over men.

For critical readers able to discern meaning and significance through a feminist lens, the casualness with which these assaults are detailed calls attention to the narrative prevalence of sexualized violence, especially at the hands of lovers, in street literature texts. As Radway surmises about the romance texts her interviewees read:

[I]t seems likely that the romance's preoccupation with male brutality is an attempt to understand the meaning of an event that has become almost unavoidable in the real world. The romance may express misogynistic attitudes not because women share them but because they increasingly need to know how to deal with them. (72)

In these romance texts, there are no consequences for the aggressors and the heroines seem unable to see such events as abuse. If Radway is correct in assuming that these violent episodes indicate a desire on the part of women writers and readers to know how to deal with sexual partner violence, then it is not surprising that Gena is unable to find a language for recovery from such trauma or to share her story with others. Gena's neighbour Markita witnesses some of the violence she is subjected to at the hands of Jamal, who openly beats her in front of the neighbourhood. Markita attempts to be a voice of reason for Gena and brings her food in a show of kindness, telling her, "'If it's one thing that I do know, if he beat you up once he'll do it again. Gena, you don't need no man like that in your life'" (15). Unfortunately, Gena's response is to ignore Markita while finishing her food because she does not want to "listen to some shit she already knew" (15). Knowledge, in and of itself, is not salvation, and it is questionable if freedom from such violence is something Gena desires or is able to expect or even imagine. This response is similar to one Gena herself has later in the novel when she sees her younger female cousins engaging in risky sexual behaviour: "What was Gena gonna tell them? It's 1990; you can catch AIDS! Like that would lead them in the right direction. *They don't believe; they just don't believe*, Gena thought. So she kept her mouth shut" (234). Silence about her experiences with rape and domestic violence and witnessing the murder of her boyfriend sets a precedent for her silence with her cousins. Unfortunately, this

silence will not save or protect any of them. In all likelihood, it will allow sexual violence to be perpetuated under a veil that normalizes it as something to be expected, even in the fictionalized world of heterosexual hip-hop romance where the author has the power to create an idealizing narrative. What does such a limited imagination of romance tell us about experiences of intimacy for the hip-hop generation? Indeed, Woods's characterization of love and romance is not hopeful. Instead, its focus on the troubling aspects of heterosexual intimacy offers a space for hip-hop feminists to engage the contradictory messages of young Black women finding empowerment through material gain while continually being made vulnerable to sexual violence as an expected cost.

Hip-Hop's Materialism & the American Dream

True to the Game, within the context of an urban love story, reveals a complex interpretation of consumer culture and aspirations for the American Dream in the lives of its characters. As the characters learn throughout the novel, their pursuit of material possessions comes at a price. Gena's ability to assert herself in her relationships with abusive men is severely undermined by her financial dependence on them to support her lifestyle. This becomes clear when Gena wants to distance herself from Jamal but can only do so by starting a new relationship with Quadir, whose presence allows her to "[feel] her power return" (19). In order for her transactional sexuality to have value, she must have a partner interested in exchange. As Gena approaches her nineteenth birthday she seems to have a moment of consciousness about the precariousness of her lifestyle, realizing, "If Qua left her today or tomorrow, if he went to jail, or if anything happened to him, she would have nothing" (114). The threat of becoming destitute, which reads as an

inevitable outcome if someone does not intervene, propels Gena to empower herself. She decides she will open a bank account and start saving some of the money Quadir gives her. Although this is not revisited later in the novel, it is the first sign of her coming to terms with her reality as a young woman reliant on the support of her lover. Much of Gena's relationship with Quadir contains elements or signs of domestic abuse such as rape and confinement to a suburban mansion after he moves her from the projects. Gena feels conflicted about this change:

She felt secure, and she felt happy. But Gena unknowingly had allowed herself to be isolated. Quadir had conveniently and successfully excused it as a safety precaution. ... No one except family was to have their home number. She could only be paged. Traveling in certain parts of the city, even talking to certain individuals, was a no-no. And, for the love of money, it was a small price to pay. It was nothing. She had no worries, but she was left alone. (117-18)

The exchange of her freedom to move throughout the city as she pleases and talk to whomever she desires for the benefit of living well off in a suburban mansion with Quadir's attention and monetary support temporarily satisfies Gena. But, as Woods's prologue warns, the highs of the drug game do not last forever. When Quadir dies, Gena is forced out of the mansion and returns to the projects without access to the lifestyle of luxury to which she has become accustomed.

Gena's desire for material markers of excessive wealth exemplifies a common feature of both contemporary hip-hop culture and American consumer culture at large. Despite its reputation for excessive materialism and conspicuous consumption, much of hip-hop culture is drawn directly from the ideals of the American Dream and its correspondent notions of success. Roopali Mukherjee argues that the "ghetto fabulous"

aesthetic associated with hip-hop culture, which is “excluded from the realm of politics and social power,” is a “performance of political subjectivity through commodity consumption” (612). Mukherjee’s incisive analysis posits that, for many in hip-hop culture, conspicuous consumption is a “way into the American polity” (612). In his analysis of the 1990s rise of the hip-hop mogul, Christopher Holmes Smith also notes the critical intermediary role the mogul plays:

What makes the hip-hop mogul significant is the degree to which his celebrity alleviates the tension within this symbolic relationship by appealing to the power of socially competitive consumption as a viable mode of civic participation and personal fulfillment. ... In short, the mogul inspires his more downtrodden constituents to “buy in” to the emerging paradigm of accessible luxury and social status and in the process assumes an influential role as social mediator. (71)

The connection between the materialism of hip-hop culture and the equating of civic participation with consumerism becomes clear through an analysis of Woods’s novel. It is the desire for status and the benefits that come with it that drives many street literature narratives.

The narratives of desire in street literature demonstrate the discursive nature of such texts as readers are able to identify with storylines that mirror real life aspirations for the comforts of wealth and success. For Woods, “the game” refers quite specifically to the illegal drug trade, but “the game” as a signifier can also refer to buying into the American Dream. For either meaning, the desired end result is the same: to have money, power, and respect. In an astute analysis of the significance of HBO’s *The Wire* for modern capitalism, Jason Read argues that in *The Wire*,

[T]he illegal drug trade acts as a sustained allegory for capitalism. It is at once outside of the world of legitimate business, governed by different rules and principles of loyalty, and the dark mirror of business, revealing the effects of a relentless pursuit of profit on the community and lives of those caught in its grip. (122)

The illegal drug trade, however, is not just an allegory for capitalism; the effects of capitalism have influenced and perhaps encouraged the proliferation of it. As a point of context for her argument about the connection between disproportionate incarceration rates and limited working-class jobs, Alexander notes that globalization and the revolutionizing technological changes in the workplace post-1970s “eliminated many of the jobs that less skilled workers once relied upon for their survival” (50). The consequences of these dramatic changes had great impact on the job opportunities for blue-collar inner-city residents, many of whom had migrated to American cities to work in their factories. As Alexander argues, “The decline in legitimate employment opportunities among inner-city residents increased incentives to sell drugs—most notably crack cocaine” (51). Read’s critique of capitalism via *The Wire* ties this interest in the illegal drug trade, as opposed to legitimate business, to the desire for the benefit of what capitalism brings to those who possess capital: the accumulation of wealth. As Read contends, legitimate business and the illegal drug trade “are unified by the fact that in each economy it is money, and not morals or any other measure, that stands as the highest value” (125). So, while the drug trade has no qualms about endangering the lives of those who become addicts or are otherwise affected by the surrounding violence, the pursuit of wealth in North American business practices also renders many global lives (of both workers and consumers) as inconsequential collateral damage of capitalist endeavours.

Though Woods does not make a critique of capitalism or the drug trade clear in the plot of her novel, the book's prologue and epilogue take up the task of positioning her voice as an instructive one that attempts to warn readers about the possible consequences of being involved in the drug trade. The original titling of the novel included the subtitle "A Teri Woods Fable," which I suggests articulates her moralistic intentions.²⁶ This adds greater weight to Woods's attempt to critique not only the actions of her novel's characters but also the world in which they exist. In an epilogue that attempts to make its moral emphasis clear with regard to the consequences of being involved in the drug trade, Woods writes,

The streets can make you and the streets can break you. The way you play the game is up to you. To those caught up in the trap of temporary pleasures, let me tell you this: the root of all evil, which is the love of money and the next man's pain, will surely come back to haunt you. We have a choice. ... Love yourselves and love one another. Give yourself time to grow and open your minds to education because it is a key to the way out. Whatever you do, make it worth something. All your consequences in life are dependent upon your behavior. If you know what the consequences are, why do you still exhibit detrimental behavior? *Because...you're true to the game.* (253)

By the novel's end, Quadir has died as well as Gena's best friend Sahirah, who is shot while with a boyfriend who was targeted by a rival drug dealer. Gena makes an escape to New York City after finding Quadir's millions, making her, by the end of the novel, one of the few characters who have managed to hold on to both the money and her life. *True to the Game II* (2007) and *III* (2008) pick up where *True to the Game* left off by following Gena's tribulations that stem from her newfound wealth. By describing the

²⁶ In later editions of the novel printed with Hachette Book Group the title is shortened to just *True to the Game*.

exhibition of detrimental behaviour as being “true to the game,” Woods frees her characters of the pressure to change their outlooks and actions, instead positioning such actions as laudably authentic to their subjectivity. However, in the context of an American polity that privileges capitalist risking-taking and a money-over-everything attitude, the vulgar adherence of Woods’s characters to the rules of “the game” shows us less about the danger of the drug world and more about the kinds of narratives that animate the American economic and social world.

Though the subjects of drug dealing, drug abuse, and interpersonal violence are abundant within street literature, not all writers represent them from the same point of view. Many street literature writers position their works as cautionary tales intended to show readers the consequences of engaging in illegal activities and destructive behaviours. But even the most generous reading of Woods’s novels would find it challenging to consider them as explicitly cautionary works. Kristina Graaff argues that Woods’s *True to the Game* series does not quite live up to punishing its characters. Instead, Graaff suggests, Woods uses metanarrative strategies to critique the characters in the novel:

Woods ... uses the epilogue to the first part of *True to the Game* to critically position herself against the characters’ behavior. ... Even more blatant are Woods’s didactic intentions in *True to the Game* 2 and 3, which end with a list of questions challenging the protagonists’ faulty behavior that are comparable to textbook instructions. (123)

Graaff suggests that, given the length of time between Woods’s initial self-publishing of *True to the Game* and the later re-releases by major publishers, the didactic framing may have come at the behest of her publishers. The first edition of *True to the Game* does not

contain the list of questions focused on the “faulty behavior” of the characters, though the prologue and epilogue remain the same. The textual difference between editions reveals a fissure in which lies a significant point of critique. If we read Woods’s work not as a cautionary tale but as a catalogue of narratives about consumerism and the desire to attain wealth at any cost, the criticism becomes not about the actions of the characters engaging in “faulty behavior” but about the world that encourages such actions. This kind of decoding also aligns Woods with previous Blaxploitation-era representations of Black criminality that celebrates the “badman” figure as the underdog who triumphs over the (white) man, though with a twist: it is the young Black woman who emerges as the victor over her foes.

Street Literature Publishing and its Future

As a street literature success, Woods’s contemporary influence in places like Source of Knowledge and Black and Nobel (bookstores in Newark, New Jersey and Philadelphia, respectively) now has less to do with respect for her writing than her role as a publisher. Her books, those written by her but also including those written by other authors and published under her Meow Meow imprint, still occupy large portions of shelf space in both stores. Notably, many of the “Teri Woods Presents” books featuring up-and-coming writers prominently display her name on the cover. Candice Jackson argues that this is part of Woods’s marketing and promotion strategy and, moreover, “seems to be the trend among new black publishing houses in which the publisher is at least as important, if not more so, than the author” (672). However, in my experience talking to people in Source of Knowledge and Black and Nobel (detailed in Chapter Two), Woods’s

name recognition seemed minimal. It seems as though her publishing success and partnership with Hachette Book Group has moved her away from her grassroots beginnings where she had to hustle to sell her books on the streets and into a more mainstream publishing culture via an office in New York City. In essence, she has become a crossover success. Her seeming lack of popularity in the independent bookstores differs from that of Sister Souljah, who still visits these stores to promote her books. Certainly, the prominent placing of Souljah's latest book *A Deeper Love Inside* attests to the commercial benefit of maintaining such ties. This is not to suggest that Woods's lack of physical presence means less commercial success for her and her publishing company. Instead, it merely brings into focus the difference in the goals of Woods and Souljah as writers. While Souljah makes her activist intentions quite clear in her books, as explored in Chapter Three, Woods's work has always been about writing herself into success and ostensibly creating inroads for writers like her to "make it" in mainstream publishing, exemplifying the role of the hip-hop mogul.

The works of Black women writers like Woods challenge notions of respectability and propriety that dictate the boundaries of Black womanhood by bringing forth issues of interpersonal and sexual violence. However, such interventions, while significant, should not be idealized as a panacea for the problematic aspects of street literature and its publishing. Gifford outlines how women writers-turned-publishers do not necessarily destroy the old dynamics of power but can simply re-inhabit them:

In an interesting twist on the power dynamics encoded in both pimping and black pulp publishing, female authors-turned-publishing-moguls – fed

up with the historically unequal gender relationships in both industries – have adapted elements of street hustling and earlier models of pulp publishing in order to position themselves in places of authority usually held by men. (173)

By focusing on Woods as an important publishing mogul, I do not intend to suggest that the mere existence of Black women writers turned publishers upends the old dynamics of power. As C. Smith argues with regard to the hip-hop music mogul, the role of the self-made mogul is to inspire others from similar beginnings to buy into the system of power and privilege. Merely changing the gender or race of the person in charge does not translate to progressive or fair publishing practices. Instead, I suggest that Woods's representation of the dynamics of inner-city life brings into critical focus contemporary issues of Black womanhood that benefit from hip-hop feminist critique. The prose may not be polished or beautifully written and the narrative may have holes that leave plot questions unanswered, but the content of *True to the Game* raises serious issues like domestic violence and economic insecurity that are pertinent to the lives of many of her readers. As a representative street literature text, *True to the Game* signifies a critical part of Black expressive culture that challenges readers and scholars alike to face their own investments in respectability politics of gender and sexuality as well as to examine the demand for those whose lived experiences do not align with middle-class expectations to model middle-class sensibilities.

Chapter Two - Urban Bookstores as Discursive Spaces

The people who agreed to speak with me for this project were lively participants and welcomed me into their spheres of discussion.²⁷ My participation in the spaces of the bookstores as both a researcher and visitor is a testament to the discursive nature of independent Black bookstores and their generative possibilities. Employees and patrons of Source of Knowledge of Newark, New Jersey and of Black and Nobel of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania offered their insights and opinions about the role of street literature in Black, urban reading culture today. Given the relevance of such fictional representations as *True to the Game* to lived experiences, I decided to look beyond the page in addressing the effects of the street literature genre within two particular communities that are hubs of cultural production and exchange. Over the course of five days, I spoke to sixteen people – a variety of customers, employees and volunteers – at Black and Nobel and Source of Knowledge. While novels like *Erasure*, which I explored in Chapter One, offer critical and, perhaps, detached insights into ways of thinking about complex issues of representation in and through literature, I saw these interviews as an opportunity to hear – from the streets – about what the popularity of street literature has meant for urban bookstores catering largely to Black reading populations. The bookstores were selected based partly on my familiarity with them but mainly because of their popularity and persistent presence in their respective cities. These cities, which both have sizable Black populations, are also important to the Black urban fiction publishing industry as centers

²⁷ With the exception of store operator Hakim Hopkins, all names have been changed to protect the identity of participants.

for production and hand-to-hand distribution. In addition, these cities are also integral to the fictional worlds created by two major authors of street literature, Teri Woods and Sister Souljah. Woods, a Philadelphia native, started her writing career in the city before moving her operations to the New York City area. Souljah, still a Greater New York City resident, often visits stores in the tri-state (New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania) region for book signings, making her a familiar face to bookstore owners.

In a YouTube video uploaded to the Hachette Book Group page in March 2009 as part of a publicity campaign for the re-release of *True to the Game*, Woods is out in Harlem where she used to sell her books during the beginning of her career (Hachette Book Group).²⁸ In the four-minute clip she recounts her origin story. As she describes, her success as a writer relied on building relationships by talking to the people in the neighborhood. She walks viewers through her thought process of choosing which people to approach about buying her book. As if planned, she takes note of a woman walking by:

Look, she got a book in her hand. She already got a book in her hand. She's gonna help me. If she ain't she gon' remember my book. I would pick them out and I would be like, they know what this means. They know what 'true to the game' means. Meaning I'm not gonna ask some chick who looks like she's really bourgie and she's got her little day job ... and 'oh my god, that's just so beneath me.' Nah fuck you, I'm not bothering her. You keep moving, I'm not even gonna waste my time talking to you. (qtd. in Hachette Book Group)

For Woods, the term “bourgie,” slang for bourgeoisie, denotes a class hierarchy that identifies the “bourgie” subject as a member of a specific class formation and who is, for

²⁸ The video is available for viewing at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hIrRKbXrUYw>.

reasons of this affiliation, assumed to be unfamiliar with or hostile to the non-bourgeoisie. In the scenario Woods describes, perceived class, in conjunction with race, plays a critical role in who she envisions as the audience for her books. What Woods looks for in those passing by is something she can recognize according to her own perception of who can connect to both her fictional and real worlds.

Woods's retelling of her early days trying to sell her books draws out an important aspect of the positioning of this project and my own as a researcher who is both a part of and apart from the communities I study. In order to be self-reflexive about my own subjectivity in the field, I have turned to various writings on the practice of ethnography that deal with questions about the ethics, responsibilities, and joys of doing such work in racialized communities as a researcher who is racialized, gendered, and class-identified in ways that both overlap with and stand out as distinct from those I encountered in the field. As Elizabeth Chin states in her ethnographic study of working-class Black kids' entanglement with American consumer culture, I too "struck out into old and familiar territory," in some sense going "home to do my fieldwork" (181).

The locations of Philadelphia, PA and Newark, NJ have been, to varying degrees, adopted homes for me. My childhood and teenage years spent in a small southern New Jersey town were filled with trips to Philly, which was a short fifteen minute car ride away. Though it was never my place of residence, Philly was familiar to me as a place of cultural sightseeing, family visits, and entertainment. On the other hand, Newark was home in a concrete way, as I lived there for nearly six years as a student and employee at Rutgers University. As a Black woman from a lower middle-class background barely a

generation removed from working-class roots, I am attuned to the class implications of my presence in the field. While in the field the narrative about my identity shifted depending on which city I was in and to whom I was speaking; at any moment, I may have been a former Rutgers student, a New Jersey native, a Black woman or “girl,” a researcher “from Canada,” someone with “female empowerment ideas,” etc. No matter how the narrative may have changed, my role as a researcher was a definitive one and could sometimes be alienating, and my status as a native who is also an outsider played a significant role in how people responded to me. As April Few, Dionne P. Stephens and Marlo Rouse-Arnett note, “Idiosyncrasies are embedded in our identities that inevitably create moments of intimacy and distance between the informant and researcher” (207). Similarly, Chin notes, “Being an outsider does not guarantee a lack of blind spots, and being an ‘insider’ can sensitize a researcher to important subtleties that might otherwise be missed” (183). As many ethnographers have highlighted, sharing a particular knowledge of the city, as I did with those in Newark, or a gender and/or racial identity does not guarantee access and can pose its own particular obstacles to research.

Given the possibility of such obstacles, I had to take great care in my approach to avoid further alienating interviewees as my very presence as a researcher/interviewer created a distance from them. My instincts told me, as Few, Stephens and Rouse-Arnett suggest, that language is a social status marker and one of the ways that distance can be created: “It connotes a privilege – education or socialization – that can drive a wedge in or cement the informant-researcher relationship” (211). As someone who engages in “code-switching” in everyday life, this is one aspect of ethnography that informed my

choices in research locations.²⁹ One of my strategies for developing closeness to my subjects was to reveal bits of my own life (that I am from Jersey, went to Rutgers, hung out as a teenager in Philly, etc.) where I thought fitting by using the slang and speech patterns of the particular city. By revealing pieces of myself to interviewees, I was attempting to minimize my privilege (the methodological considerations of this approach are further explored in the Introduction). I cannot say with certainty how much this shaped the interviews themselves but, as I explain later in this chapter, my informal conversations with people in each store demonstrated some level of comfort between me and interviewees.

In addition to the content of my speech acts, my use of slang was also part of my language-based attempts at closeness. South Jersey slang and language patterns are closely aligned with those of Philadelphia. This overlap made speaking to people in the Philly bookstore a non-daunting task and while I possessed knowledge of the vernacular, my own accent marked me as an outsider. The same can be said of my speech patterns that align with those in Newark. As a researcher, I wanted interviewees to feel a level of comfort with me that would make them amenable to my questions, but I often felt self-conscious about what I was asking of them. How would it feel, I wondered, if a stranger from some school I knew nothing of came to ask me questions about my personal reading habits? In Black and Nobel of Philadelphia, for example, owner Hakim Hopkins told me about those who had come before me, including one HBO executive, an academic

²⁹ Code-switching refers to the practice of changing language styles, dialect, or registers depending on setting. Most of my own code-switching happens as I move from more formal settings like a classroom or academic conference presentation to informal ones, such as speaking to family and friends.

researcher, and journalists from a number of networks, all interested in the success and history of the store. As a result, I wanted to make sure that my line of inquiry was focused on the aspects that were relevant to my research topic but also respectful of the space, the community it is a part of, and the individuals.

Since beginning this project I have wanted somehow to account for the specialness of places like these bookstores—everyday spaces in which aligned bodies (be it by race, gender, class or location alone) gather and interact with one another. Bookstores, in particular, tend to attract a range of people, from those seeking new knowledge (as the Newark store’s name hails) to those looking for pleasurable, momentary escape from the realities of everyday life. These bookstores and others like them also serve as meeting places for activists and others seeking a language to address the inequalities associated with intersections of class, gender and race that are so visible, especially in urban life. The importance of the bookstore as a meeting place greatly influences my analysis of street literature, a genre that is both invigorating and controversial for readers, writers and scholars alike.³⁰ Street literature texts are sites of production for hip-hop culture, in its intersectional complexities of gender, race and class, with specific advantages and risks for Black women writers and producers. In this context, the Black bookstore functions as an alternate public sphere that allows for what

³⁰ Recent scholarship by Danielle Fuller and DeNel Sedo considers the social practices of contemporary reading culture. Fuller and Sedo cover the promotion of organized “reading events” on city/regional/national scales that are tied to promotion through mass media. The reading culture explored in their work differs from my project here as the reading culture of street literature is largely shaped by informal channels of discussion and word of mouth promotion as opposed to mass media organized top-down approaches. In these cases, the space itself is the point of meeting and the discussions within these spaces are not limited to books and reading. See Fuller and Sedo, *Reading Beyond the Book: The Social Practices of Contemporary Literary Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

Nancy Fraser calls “discursive contestation” (86), which is the process that allows a public sphere to determine its own limits of public discourse according to the demands or desires of its members. Public spheres are negotiated and renegotiated according to the practices of its members, as Stuart Hall and Gwendolyn Pough both highlight. Thomas Holt’s claim that where and how people live makes a difference in how we are to understand historically specific Black public spheres holds particular value in my analysis here (327). The explicit purpose of my fieldwork interviews was to hear from readers and others who are familiar with street literature texts about the importance or influence of the genre and to understand the larger context of production and consumption of street literature. The interviews with people at Black and Nobel and Source of Knowledge reveal these bookstores to be critically discursive spaces with active participants.

Though my project is thematically concerned with interrogating representations of Black womanhood and the dynamics of gender and sexuality, the interviews covered a broader range of topics as interviewees, in their responses, chose to amplify particular ideas over others. This ethnographic work was important in adding perspective from readers across gender and generational lines, grounded in their social and material contexts, about street literature reading culture. Not all interview responses dealt explicitly with gender, but race and representation often factored into how interviewees contextualized their opinions. The Black bookstore is a meeting space where the presence of urban, predominantly Black working and lower middle-class residents is not merely tolerated but celebrated; accordingly, the Black bookstore is a community that maintains

itself as an accessible public sphere for its patrons and local participants. The interviews provide evidence of both the lively public discourse and material social practices of meaning-making and institution building necessary for my theorizing of Black bookstores as discursive spaces and raise challenging questions that address the desire to reconcile varied representations with the commercial success of “problematic” texts. However, as Joan Sangster suggests, “Privilege is not negated simply by inclusion of other voices, or by denial of our ultimate authorship and control” (14). My inclusion of ethnographic work in this project is in effort to mitigate the sense of power attached to my role as a researcher and the authority of the critic more broadly. Venturing out of the comforts of my solitary writing practice to listen and bear witness to the stories of others who were willing to share with me proved to be a culturally enriching and intellectually challenging experience, for which I am grateful.³¹

Distinguishing “Knowledge” from “the Street”

The physical layout of each bookstore tells a particular story. Both Black and Nobel and Source of Knowledge displayed their books according to market demands, resulting in street literature texts being displayed at the front of the store. In both stores the split between texts with presumed positive representations or unquestioned literary merit and those with lucrative commercial pull was materially expressed in the sectioning of the store into the “knowledge” and “hood books” sides. Street literature encompassed rows of wall and floor space and was often separated from what Cynthia at Source of

³¹ Many thanks to the staff and visitors of Black and Nobel bookstore in Philadelphia and Source of Knowledge bookstore in Newark, NJ who spoke with me for this project.

Knowledge calls the “side of knowledge,” which was stocked with non-fiction and some literary fiction texts. The need to categorize texts is a basic characteristic of book selling. However, in addition to this necessary structuring, the physical distance of each category from the other in turn encourages a clear distinguishing of oneself as a reader of a particular “side” of the store, an iterative act that allows for variation as one can identify as a “knowledge” or street literature reader at different moments. The oscillation between reader identities reveals both the influence and contestation of dominant assumptions of meritorious reading practices even within alternate spaces. I characterize this division as a sort of double consciousness, what W.E.B. DuBois called the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (2). This sensation is part of the cultural demand that compels many Black Americans to publicly adhere to middle-class notions of respectability. Such notions of respectability are often at odds with a hip-hop aesthetic that privileges street consciousness or knowledge.³²

³² Over the course of my time observing in the Source of Knowledge, Saul, an employee there, demonstrated comprehensive familiarity with the street literature through his ability to guide customers who came into the store with questions about different texts. Initially, Saul expressed to me an interest in the “knowledge” books and minimized his knowledge of the fiction. The impetus to present oneself to me, a researcher, as solely or mostly a consumer of “knowledge” texts relates to the assumed cultural capital such texts hold in the eyes of others, echoing back to the sensation of double consciousness articulated by DuBois. Nevertheless, Saul’s ability to direct readers interested in street literature to the kinds of books they may like within the genre demonstrates how much cultural capital is specific to each particular culture. In the reading culture of street literature, which takes on a hip-hop aesthetic, Saul’s ability to differentiate between texts is a valuable asset.

This perceptual schism is engendered by what some familiar with street literature texts view as the glorification of criminal activity. Canonical literary fiction by Black writers was offered in both stores and often fell somewhere in the center of the store on a smaller, less prominent shelf. Literary fiction in scholarly discourse is much less polarizing in the in-house debates among bookstore owners and employees about meritorious reading material (much as it is in scholarship), and this middle-of-the-store placement further highlights its neutral positioning.



Figure 1: At Source of Knowledge, literary and Christian fiction books were placed on smaller display shelves in the center of the store. Photo credit: Marquita R. Smith



Figure 2: (Source of Knowledge) Here, the literary fiction begins to share shelf space with urban fiction featuring more romance-based storylines. Photo credit: Marquita R. Smith

In addition to the number of publishing houses founded by Black women writers like Teri Woods, there are numerous women working to manage the day-to-day operations of bookstores like Black and Nobel and Source of Knowledge. The contributions of such women are integral to both the production and consumption of street literature as Black women account for the bulk of its authorship and readership. Portions of the interviews covered in this chapter highlight some of the most salient stories – as told to me by the patrons and operators of Black and Nobel and Source of Knowledge – that demonstrate how women are fundamental to the success of both street literature and Black bookstores that sell it. The interviews also reveal that what Kenneth Warren describes as the “moralistic and economic” (111) desire to determine what people read is not limited to literary writers but also permeates the street literature industry itself.³³

Black and Nobel: a Man, a Table, a Mission and a Dream

At Black and Nobel bookstore in Philadelphia, I spoke to Hakim Hopkins, the founder of the store, about its beginnings. Though Hopkins was generous in acknowledging the selection of people who played a role in his individual success and that of the store, the origin story of Black and Nobel stands out as a prime example of the integral role women play in the creation and maintenance of such spaces. Hopkins recounted the history of the store preceding its legitimate storefront where it now stands

³³ As figure 2 illustrates, this kind of visual presentation of urban or street literature alongside “good” literature is presently happening in bookstores. The problem for Nick Chiles seems to come from the assumption that presenting the street or urban literature in the same shelf space as the literary texts in mainstream bookstores presents a picture that the uninformed potential reader may not be able to fully or “properly” decipher.

at the intersection of Broad and Erie streets. As he explained it to me, the seed for having a book selling business was planted by a woman named Isis who was attending a program with him at Temple University. The primary purpose of the program was to help people (re)enter the workforce after experiencing life traumas or setbacks. According to him, he was “the only straight man” in the program at the time (Hopkins). He credits Isis for inspiring him by bringing him self-help books to read, which he devoured while living with his aunt. Another woman, whom he calls Ms. Bonnie, helped solidify his place on the corner, which enabled his mobile book stand to become a more permanent fixture. He says, “She allowed me to set up in front of her flower shop and I never had to pay her any money. All I had to do was deliver flowers for her to the funerals on Saturday mornings. So I was able to save all the money I was making, no overhead, and I was busy” (Hopkins). Without prodding from me, Hopkins offered these two particular women as exemplars of care and community when he needed it and credits them with being vital to the origination of Black and Nobel. Isis offered the spiritual and emotional guidance he needed to believe in himself, and Ms. Bonnie gave him the space and opportunity to reach his financial goals and avoid the constant hassle from the license and inspection agency in the city.

Hopkins also recognizes another woman, Karina, as being responsible for developing the store’s shipping to prisons project. However, though Karina went through the steps to arrange shipping books to prisons, Hopkins was eager to note that he came up with the idea to stamp the books with the Black and Nobel brand. As he said, “I’ve stamped so many books with my information, that’s like *my* brand. Every book *I* sell *I*

stamp” (original oral emphasis, Hopkins). Hopkins’s final words on the beginnings of the prison shipment project stand out as an example of what often happens to the material and emotional labour of others when representation is at stake. In the case of the Black and Nobel brand, despite the important contributions of the women who helped along the way, the work of many gets narrowed down to a single representational voice which, in this case, belongs to Hopkins. Hopkins made a point to acknowledge such contributions in our interview; however, the words on the Black and Nobel website tell a different, more reductive story: “In The Beginning there was a Man, a Table, a Mission and a Dream” (Black and Nobel). The implicit reference to the American Dream, which was prepared long in advance of Hopkins, outlines an ethos of individualism and success that both men and women can relate to in either pursuit of it or in failure to achieve it.

The volume of orders the store receives for the “We Ship to Prisons” program (Hopkins estimates about a hundred a day) is enough to occupy a staff member dedicated to preparing those orders for shipment. According to Hopkins, Karina was knowledgeable about the logistics of shipping items to prisons because of her own experience making kufi caps and shipping them to area prisons, beginning with the one in which her husband was incarcerated. With high rates of imprisonment among Black men, family members and spouses, women who take on caregiving roles within these relationships often assume the responsibility of maintaining contact between those incarcerated and the outside world. While I was in the bookstore, a young woman, who appeared to be in her late twenties, came in to place an order for a selection of magazines and books to be sent to her locked-up loved one. It was clear to me that this was not the

first time she had placed such an order. Often, Black women's experiences with the criminal justice system extend beyond the quantitative assessment one can glean from statistics. The experiences of women like Karina and the young woman I observed placing an order in some ways mirror the fictional representations in many of the street literature texts sold in the stores. The stories of these women add depth and life to one-dimensional statistical representations of incarceration rates and embody the affective consequences for women whose intimate relationships are shaped both concretely and intangibly by their interactions with the penal system.³⁴

The Source of Knowledge

At Source of Knowledge bookstore in Newark, Cynthia, a long-time employee turned partner, runs the day-to-day business of the store. Douglas, who was referred to by two male employees as “*the owner*,” a point of emphasis, spends his days carving wooden picture frames in his workshop in the store's basement. Douglas was clear in his deference to Cynthia in matters of the everyday functioning of the bookstore and directed me to speak with her as the representative for Source of Knowledge. Despite all the changes the downtown core of Newark has seen, including a rise in new businesses that has accompanied wider gentrification of the area, Source of Knowledge maintains its identity as a Newark staple. The bookstore has been a presence in downtown Newark for

³⁴As stated in Chapter One, the repercussions of the War on Drugs flow beyond the confines of the prison itself and in response to the pervasive nature of the penal system, strategies and advice about coping with the results of the War on Drugs spreads in a grassroots, experiential way (i.e. how to ship books, communicate with imprisoned loved ones, sharing legal advice, etc.). While it is outside the scope of this study to detail the affective experiences of women whose partners are separated from them by imprisonment, it is important to acknowledge such intricacies exist.

nearly twenty years. The store no longer sells just books (a trend I also observed at Black and Nobel) as they have felt the financial need to diversify. The rear of the store houses hundreds of paintings framed by Douglas and replica African masks adorn the walls.



Figure 3: Display of street literature at Source of Knowledge bookstore (Newark, NJ). Replica African masks hanging above are also for sale as the bookstore has expanded its catalogue of items that help it stay afloat. Photo credit: Marquita R. Smith

Over the two days I spent in the bookstore the flow of customers was low. According to Cynthia, the summer is usually their slow period. With only two other part-time employees, including one who was originally in the store as an apprentice to Douglas, Cynthia is the public representative of the bookstore and often interacts with customers. Given her important role and investment in the reputation of the store, we spent a large portion of our time talking about the ways she is working to build the profile of the store

as well as discussing her ideas about street literature and the aspects of its representation she finds problematic.

Critical Views on Street Literature

The assumptions latent in the gendered and class-based criticisms of street literature do not account for the discourse that circulates among readers and sellers of the genre. To address this gap, my interviews with store owners and patrons in Source of Knowledge and Black and Nobel uncover critiques about street literature from the sites of its popularity. During our interview, Hopkins of Black and Nobel suggested that street literature is on the decline. He said,

To me, it's playing out. ... How many Benzes can you get, how many Maybachs can you get, how many gold chains can you get, how many people can you kill, how many people can go to jail. ... Same stuff that's in the rap is in this. And I'm not knocking it. That's something that we all from the urban community or ghetto or hood can relate to but it's a lot more going on.

Hopkins is careful in his assessment not to dismiss or “knock” the content of street literature that may account for the experiences of some while drawing attention to the diversity of experiences that occur in urban spaces.³⁵ His declaration that there is “a lot more going on” is an implicit critique of the narrative redundancy that is potentially limiting, despite its relatability for Black, urban readers. Debra, a woman who appeared

³⁵ Despite his own feelings about the constrictive stereotypes of the genre, Hopkins concedes that it is what sells most and he must keep it stocked to stay afloat. By his account, at least ten bookshops have closed in the last year alone but he has sold over one million books in the last ten years. He says the digital availability of the books has changed not only the way people access books but also the way readers interact with authors since they can now get a “signed” copy of a book without ever meeting the author. Brick-and-mortar bookselling generally is on the decline and not just street literature sales, especially since street literature is what sells best at both Black and Nobel and Source of Knowledge.

to be in her late thirties, did not have much time to speak with me but she did offer the following in response to my question about her attraction to street literature: “It’s real; it’s real life.” Her evaluation was echoed throughout the day by others sharing similar feelings about the genre. The notion of street literature being “real” to readers is essential to my analysis of the critical response to the genre. If these texts, which contain narratives and characters that do not uphold the standard of progressive or “positive” representation asked of racial projects, read as “real life” to many, then what is at stake in devaluing it? Does hiding away street literature erase, eliminate, or minimize the “real life” problems that drive many of its fictional worlds?

The ideological implications of devaluing street literature are evident in the ways readers of the genre see themselves within their reading publics and the broader social domain. Saul, one of the part-time employees at Source of Knowledge, informally offered that he had learned more about Black Americans in his thirteen years of working there than he learned in all of his public schooling. For him, the store has definitely been a source of knowledge but, as his expansive reading of the fiction side of the store demonstrates, it is also a source of pleasure. Saul was at first hesitant to admit the breadth of his knowledge about the street literature books but was eager to tell me, a Ph.D. candidate (a label that can be loaded with social and cultural capital), how many of the “knowledge” books he had read. This kind of social presentation demonstrates what Erving Goffman calls “face-work” (226). Face-work describes the efforts to defend oneself against criticism for reading “culturally devalued materials” and includes strategies like “criticizing devalued materials to others, citing the intellectual value of the

materials, and distancing oneself from ‘typical’ readers” (Sweeney 169). The largest audience for street literature is young Black women, a demographic that is often chided by cultural elites and literary writers for its taste. The words of Nick Chiles, who infamously declared street literature to be “almost exclusively pornography for black women,” (Chiles) reveal just how devalued such texts are and, by extension, the readers who enjoy them.³⁶ In the context of young Black women’s reading of street literature being devalued, Saul’s performance of face-work becomes a clear method of avoiding the gendered and class-based degradation that is typically aimed at young Black women.

Aside from the structured interviews I conducted with readers and store operators, some of my most informative moments came as an unobtrusive observer of other customers coming into the store. While I was sitting in Source of Knowledge a group comprised of two Black women and three Black men came in to look at the art in the rear of the store. While walking through the aisles, one woman took notice of a series of books called *Bitch* by Deja King. It was clear from their tone that they disliked the books. When heading out of the store the other woman stopped to examine some of the fiction books and stated openly, “These books disgust me.” Taryn, a young Black woman I talked to later in the day, also picked up one of the *Bitch* books. I shared with her what I had overheard earlier in the day and she said she had a similar response upon first glance but came to the understanding that the title was not using “bitch in a bad way.” At

³⁶ For a discussion of these views, see the Introduction; Hill, Perez, and Irby (2008); Gibson, Marshall, and Staples (2009); and Rosen (2004).

eighteen, Taryn was the youngest interviewee between both bookstores. When I asked how Black women are represented in street literature texts she said,

I mean, some have their taste. I mean, even with the title alone...it's a bit racy. *Bitch*, it's a hard word like, geez, you sort of hurt my feelings with the title alone but like they say you can't judge a book by its cover so I think that ... you just gotta read it.

Even though she was willing to give the *Bitch* series a chance despite her misgivings about the title and her initial adverse reaction to it, Taryn does not find all street literature texts worthy of such consideration. As she explained, part of the reason she gave the *Bitch* series a chance was because her older sister had read and recommended it. She said she has stopped reading books whose titles were “harsh” because they were “way too much,” a decision which demonstrates the active role young women play in being their own arbiters of morality and taste when consuming culture. As a point of clarification, Taryn ended our discussion of *Bitch* by saying,

Just because it says “bitch” in the front doesn't mean the negative towards “bitch” because I know some top bitches. ... The book isn't really about a bitch. ... It's a good book.

Taryn's use of “bitch” throughout her response carries a range of connotations that are not clear without context. Her own assessment of the term reveals the extent to which her understanding of language is informed by both speaker and intent. It was clear that Taryn was active and capable in making her own choices about reading and developing her own taste profile. The older women's negative responses to the book series and Taryn's willingness to read the word “bitch” as a reclaimed term demonstrate two different ideas that are not necessarily divided along generational lines (as Taryn's initial distaste for the

titles before reading reveals). What is noteworthy in this encounter is the willingness or ability of one to read beyond something that, from one perspective, feels objectionable, and maybe even thrillingly subversive, in order to get to the worthwhile substance readers like Taryn and my next Source of Knowledge interviewee, Kyra, find in texts like *Bitch*.

Kyra, a Newark native in her late twenties, was quite open about her love of King's books, especially the *Bitch* series. She credits King with getting her interested in "reading heavy," as she described it. Kyra acknowledged multiple aspects of the act of reading. Sometimes she reads books that have life lessons that speak to her specifically while others are not representative of her experience at all. She offered the following example of relating to stories that do not necessarily reflect her own experiences:

Like, I don't deal in the drug empire but I know people who [do] and some of the stories about, like, people getting strung out and stuff like that, I can relate to that because I have people in my family that was on drugs and they were so heavy into it that they'd rob, cheat, and steal, that I know of.

As she explained, one does not need to have sold or bought drugs to comprehend the widespread impact of the drug trade and the cost of drug abuse. Her own relationships with people dealing with drug addiction are enough for her to find such narratives realistic and worth reading. In scenarios like this, reading narratives that are familiar to personal experience can offer a way of making sense of those experiences as readers of street literature often "are attempting to understand their reality while trying to escape it" (Early).

Kyra also shared her perspective on the relationship between street literature and hip-hop music that is informed by her experience in music promotion. In her view, street

literature “relates to music just by the struggle in some of the books” (Kyra). Similarly, Marc Lamont Hill, Biany Perez, and Decoteau J. Irby intimate, “The connection between street fiction and hip-hop culture is also evidenced by the authors’ consistent allusions and direct references to popular rap songs, artists, and fashion items” (77). But, for all its hip-hop aesthetic, Kyra sees the relation of street literature to other kinds of music as well. To her, the importance lies in the narrative, regardless of its form:

It relates to all types of music because it explains the struggle, struggle in different situations, so it’s like everyday life. It’s a fiction book but it’s so real that sometimes even with myself, I see myself in some of the characters that I read. Even though it’s written it still seems real, like it’s not as [fictional] as it is because sometimes ... it could be dramatic but it’s still real life, like it’s still someone else’s story.

Kyra expressed a sense of connection with fictional characters represented in what could be, from her experiential knowledge, true-to-life circumstances. She emphasized the connection of fictional narratives to real-life experience in her own reading practice. During our exchange, she offered some advice to writers, academic, aspiring or otherwise:

Just talk to different people, ask them their story ‘cause you never know. Like with me, you won’t know who I am until you start to walk in my shoes but as a writer you need to sometimes bring yourself in that predicament ... Like if you write about me or people that I know, the average person, just ask them their story, just follow them. You won’t know 100% but just follow they shoes, listen to how they talk, the way they move, their emotions, it makes your story... more realistic because you’re not making it up. You’ve actually seen it, you [were] with that person so it’s better that way.

Kyra’s standards for a good story reveal what is appealing to her and other readers of street literature: the raw, real, and often uncomfortable story of struggle. These are the

kinds of texts that move her and legitimate her knowledge by making narratives that are familiar to her subjects to be shared, read, enjoyed, and discussed by others.

For some readers, street literature offers insight from the perspective of peers. April, another young woman I spoke with very briefly, offered that she liked reading street literature because it resembled real life and sometimes, as a reader, she wants to get a different perspective. In her case, it was to “hear a man’s point of view” on a relationship. She also shared that she does not normally read, but was in Source of Knowledge that day simply looking for something to pass the time while working a double shift at a nearby store since the familiarity of street literature makes it an easy read. Saul, with his extensive knowledge, was able to direct April to a book suited to her taste. The exchange between April and Saul was an embodiment of knowledge-making and the building of community in action. In that moment, Saul abandoned the face-work he engaged in with me and instead used his knowledge of street literature to help April find a book to relieve the stress and boredom of her local retail job. This was not merely an act of good salesmanship. When put to use, his street literature knowledge became a source of validation for the genre and readers who enjoy it.

When I asked Cynthia about her reading practices in relation to what her store sells she said, “When doing books you have to be both sides [fiction and ‘knowledge’]. When a customer comes in and asks you what’s good, what is this about, you have to be able to tell them from both angles.” As she demonstrates, simply being knowledgeable about the fictional texts does not amount to an endorsement of their content or messages. Cynthia was honest about her negative feelings about what she sees as the glorification of

drug dealing in many, though not all, street literature texts. For her, there are some street literature texts that serve as teaching tools. She said there are “a lot of books about life lessons.” She pointed to the writer Madison Taylor, whose *Scattered Lies* trilogy addresses the difficult and often silenced issues of child molestation and sexual abuse. Taylor, while falling under the umbrella of urban fiction or street literature, uses her books to explore issues beyond the illegal drug trade. Cynthia also is a fan of Sister Souljah, whose latest book, *A Deeper Love Inside*, was displayed upon the counter. Cynthia shared that she enjoys Souljah’s writing; she says she likes that she “teaches as well as [tells] a great story.” Like many other street literature narratives, Souljah’s books do not always have happy endings. Souljah, Cynthia said, is an example of a writer who provides life lessons in her books and touches on topics that resonate with people like “sexuality, things that we try to turn our heads and ignore.”³⁷ These exemplary texts highlighted by Cynthia demonstrate the informal teaching possibilities in and through street literature.

The value Cynthia finds in some street literature texts reveal the pedagogical schism between the didactic “knowledge” books and the profitable fiction books to be more illusory than it first appears. Street literature provides a dependable source of revenue for the bookstores that supports their business and their roles as discursive community spaces. Cynthia said she “would love to stay in the non-fiction side” but knows “the urban side is what pays the bills” since “people tend to like to live that

³⁷ The potential and risk in Souljah’s work is explored in Chapter Three.

fantasy.” The cognitive distinction that Cynthia, Saul, and others made between street literature and “knowledge” books demonstrates a hierarchy of texts based on their presumed intellectual value, which I suggest is influenced by larger discursive tendencies to align merit with the expression of particularly middle-class ideals. Alton—an activist, poet and old friend of Douglas’s who has been around since the earliest days of Source of Knowledge—considers the fiction side of the store a “double jeopardy.” He said,

I’m glad to know they’re reading. I’m sad to know what they’re reading ... the only thing is I’m glad to know they’re reading hoping that they can transform that and go on to another level because sometimes you have to go from down here to get up there. That’s my only hope. But thank God they’re reading because reading is good. ... Thank God Douglas still has this side [history] for those who want to know their history. That side [street literature] is for those who want to know a little nonsense, but thank God again I say because they’re reading.

Alton’s idea of readers migrating from one side to the other was initially countered by the observation of Jason, a part-time employee who said the two reading audiences are distinct, “actually cut and dry” (Jason). Although he started by saying this, his follow-up statements pointed to a more nuanced assessment as he explained that some readers do buy from both sides of the store. The distinction between the history and the fiction books is a sort of canonization of its own, which I understand as a leisure reader. However, as a literary scholar, I am intrigued by the tendency to overlook fiction as a potential source of knowledge in itself, an insight emphasized by Kyra and supported by the examples raised by Cynthia and others. Numerous interviewees spoke to the value of the life lessons found in many of the street literature texts they read. When recounting a conversation she had with Douglas’s niece, who noticed the overwhelming number of cover models with

light skin and long, straight hair, Cynthia presented a great example of the visual impact that street literature texts can have. Cynthia said she had never thought of the “light skin, long hair” trend before but took the opportunity to explain the historical context of shadeism or colorism, including the brown paper bag test, to the young woman while directing her to a book within the store that explores such issues of representation. Here, the cover of a street literature text served as an edifying point for critical intervention to increase the knowledge and awareness of both the young woman and Cynthia, showing how politics of beauty continuously shape contemporary hip-hop culture.

Connecting across Generations

The existence of bookstores like Black and Nobel and Source of Knowledge is critical to maintaining viable discursive spaces for alternative public spheres where racialized, urban voices across generations are heard and bear witness to one another. Such discourse allows for greater communication and understanding of the intricate problems that face such populations today. Each bookstore exhibited its discursive nature in a range of ways. At Source of Knowledge, Cynthia runs an occasional book club meeting and invites authors to come to sessions to speak with readers. As she said, she chooses books that “anybody, young, old, man, or woman can relate to” (Cynthia). Cynthia’s cultural role as a tastemaker and book club leader lends itself to one form of mainstream reading culture as analyzed by Danielle Fuller and DeNel Sedo. In their work on book clubs and mass reading events, Fuller and Sedo were surprised by the number of participants who were attracted to “ephemeral experiences of community” where “expression or enactment of affective modes of citizenship appears more possible than it

does in everyday life” (211). In these ephemeral communities, the books are secondary; one does not have to read the book to show up to meetings or to feel free to speak. Similar to Fuller and Sedo’s findings, participants in the spaces of the bookstores rely on each other to bear witness to their articulations of literary and/or sociocultural analysis, whether through planned book club meetings like Cynthia’s or the informal discussions taking place at any given moment.

At Black and Nobel, there are two spaces dedicated to selling objects other than books: one for a jewelry maker and another for Gloria, a nearly sixty-year-old vegan food seller. The store interior resembles a bazaar. Nevertheless, the bookstore is not just a space of commerce—it is also a space of contact and connection. My interview with Gloria revealed as much, as she explained how her encounters with the younger demographic of the store have changed her perception and assumptions of social life. Gloria was friendly, open, and willing to share her personal feelings. She spoke at length about the importance of the store as a discursive space that has inspired change. She said being there for the past year has helped her bridge a generational gap with the young people she often meets. Gloria said,

An exchange is happening where it wasn’t happening before. ... I had to understand ... that my generation of home training, family situation, schooling, career work, all that kind of stuff, is not what’s happening now ... something has to occur to bring that awakening to you and so being here and having that hands on one-on-one contact with people has allowed me to sit down just like you and I are sitting now and actually have conversations to find out that they were children of addicts. ... Everybody didn’t end up on the negative side but that these were the channels and the changes, the twists. It wasn’t a straight progression. ... It made a personal face, a personal story so it just made me have to rethink and re-evaluate,

rebuild what I thought ‘cause at first you gotta understand that you have a concept and that concept is wrong so you gotta tear it down.

The channels, changes, and twists she refers to are part of the insidious effects of drug addiction and War on Drugs policies and legislation. Gloria recalled being able to go home to someone every day and having food to eat as a child, which she recognizes may not be the case for many of the young people who have taken to street hustling to provide for younger siblings. The personal stories she has heard from those she has met in the store demonstrate to her how children emerging from these conditions can possibly grow up to be like characters in street literature and hip-hop music and thus encourage the growth of her empathy. Gloria’s willingness to listen and converse with the young people she encounters has taken on new life in her relationships as she has become an advocating voice to her own friends. Her understanding of the different social conditions that have produced the hip-hop generation came as a result of her conversations within the contact space of the bookstore. This is an example of how places like Black and Nobel build social meaning. The space of the bookstore creates possibilities for generative, intergenerational discussions and connections that may otherwise be missed.

In summation of the popular appeal of street literature, Joshua, a Philadelphia activist, emcee and schoolteacher shared his perspective on street literature and why it speaks to people:

That’s what a great portion of our lives is around: sex, economics, childrearing, urban plight and urban areas and those books do speak to a certain part of our condition. However, I feel like the reality of what’s the solution is missing in those books so I can’t be a heavy partaker of reading those types of material. But I comprehend it and in some ways I know

what it stimulates. ... The street novels speak to getting the emotional side of our being in my opinion.

Joshua was one of the most guarded in his recorded responses, yet his answers to my questions speak volumes about the discursive possibilities and exchange of critical thought within spaces like Black and Nobel and Source of Knowledge. Joshua's assertion that street literature texts do not provide "solutions" brings me back to my question about what our expectations for literature are. What must African American literature or popular fiction do? Is a "good" literature one that instructs? If cataloguing or detailing narratives of struggle is not enough, is it the role of readers and critics to offer solutions? After the end of the recorded interview Joshua wanted to engage me in conversation about who I am and my own feminist or, in his words, "female empowerment" ideas. This off-the-record engagement is emblematic of the unpredictable discursive nature of spaces such as the Black bookstore and highlights the importance of these spaces to not just fantasy or escapism but also activist projects and public intellectual dialogue.

Chapter Three - Sister Souljah Speaks: *No Disrespect, The Coldest Winter Ever*, and the Criticality of Hip-Hop Feminism

In order to withstand the weather, we had to become stone, and now we bruise ourselves upon the other who is closest.

--Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

Who, after all, need 'permit' ... black men to take their rightful places at the 'head of the family,' except the black wife and mother, usurper at the table of intimate power?

--Candice Jenkins, *Private Lives, Proper Relations*

Through an analysis of the work of Sister Souljah, this chapter explores both the discursively disruptive power of the troublesome voice and the risks it may assume when it lacks an intersectional approach. As one of the most popular Black writers and visible activists of the 1990s, Souljah was well known for her oratory skill. Her first novel *The Coldest Winter Ever* is considered by many to be a foundational text of the street literature genre, despite Souljah's own repudiation of this categorization (Ofori-Atta). In the novel, the main character, Winter Santiago, the daughter of a drug kingpin, gets caught up in the trappings of material gains from her father's enterprise. Her father's drug dealing soon rips apart her family: Winter's father goes to prison, while her three sisters are dispersed throughout the state child welfare system and her mother becomes addicted to crack cocaine. Despite the traumatic destruction of her nuclear family life, Winter attempts to maintain a semblance of the flashy lifestyle she has grown accustomed to and, as a result, ends up in prison just like her father. The novel is presented as a cautionary tale about the lack of community, compassion, and hope and the dangers associated with the drug game, themes that overlap with Woods's *True to the Game*. However, Souljah's representation departs from a purely fictional account and

opens up a new discursive space when she inserts herself into the novel as an activist character who tries but fails to help Winter see the error in her ways.

My analysis of *The Coldest Winter Ever* and *No Disrespect* demonstrates how both texts, despite their anti-racist messages, are also complicit in propping up oppressive racialized ideologies of gender and sexuality. The liberation rhetoric endorsed by Souljah, which Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman historicizes as “refigured patriarchy under black nationalism” (23), is constituted by a minimizing of the concerns of Black womanhood as distractions from the goals of Black liberation—a notion that has long been critiqued within Black feminist theory. In my analysis, I highlight the importance of a hip-hop feminist sensibility for analyzing cultural productions like *The Coldest Winter Ever* and *No Disrespect*. Hip-hop feminism, with its indebtedness to the work of previous Black feminists like the Combahee River Collective, provides young women of the hip-hop generation with a model of feminism that accounts for the complexities of hip-hop culture and women’s participation in it. Hip-hop feminism does not merely take cues from the most dominant representations of young (Black) women as passive consumers of the music and images; instead, it takes seriously women of color’s critical engagements with and contributions to the culture. A hip-hop feminist reading of popular street literature texts like *The Coldest Winter Ever* accounts for women’s contributions and highlights the dialogic nature of cultural discourse to complicate simplistic readings of hip-hop as a misogynistic space and to disrupt the authority of a singular, masculinist voice. However, as my analysis of street literature texts, bookstore interviews, and hip-hop performance in this dissertation reveal, the relationship of women to hip-hop culture

is not without contradiction and complexity. Souljah's work is one example of the fulfillment of a Black nationalist promise of empowerment at the expense of an intersectional feminist one.

When writing about her use of popular culture Souljah says, "I knew that if I could create characters and artists through radio, television, and film, who represented the values that I worked for, I could actually reach more children than it was possible to reach individual by individual" (*No Disrespect* 315). The discursive contestation that emerges out of street literature reading practices outlined in Chapter Two demonstrates the possibilities Souljah gestures towards; yet, as the interviews express, the encoded meaning of a text does not dictate how readers decode them. Both *The Coldest Winter Ever* and *No Disrespect* can be read in complex ways that may resist the values that Souljah works for as an activist. Making use of a "percussive feminism"—which the Crunk Feminist Collective theorizes by drawing from the definition of percussion as "the striking of one body with or against another with some degree of force" (Durham, Cooper and Morris 723-724)—holds generative possibility for a hip-hop feminist reading of her work. Though Souljah's novel *The Coldest Winter Ever* and autobiography *No Disrespect* at times replicate patriarchal Black nationalist language that views Black women as "usurper[s] at the table of intimate power" (Jenkins 90), the liberatory effect of Souljah's presence as a voice within the hip-hop public sphere and the role her texts play as culturally percussive objects provide a space through which hip-hop feminists can challenge rigid senses of Black femininity and masculinity that bolster homophobia and sexism as well as respectability politics that leave young Black women out in the cold.

Since this dissertation seeks to direct attention to the perceptual and cultural work being done in the creative output of the hip-hop generation, Souljah's access to privileged roles in multiple spheres of publicity offers a rich example of the power of publicity to simultaneously produce and reproduce troublesome discourse. The connection between music and literature in hip-hop is noticeable in Souljah's presentation: when she dedicated her attention to developing her role as an activist and writer, the attitude and swagger of hip-hop still played an important role in the delivery of her message and allowed the same level of bravado and passion often present in hip-hop music to carry on in her oratory and written work. Her hip-hop credibility, aligned with her overlapping roles as activist, rapper, and writer, grants her access to various spheres that seek to amplify her cultural capital, and thus her message, in ways that those designated solely as "rapper," "activist," or "writer" do not enjoy. However, when read collectively, *No Disrespect* and *The Coldest Winter Ever* intensify the shortcomings involved with being a public figure with multiple platforms to communicate messages to discrete audiences. While writers and musicians are frequently granted creative license to be, at times, contradictory, provocative, and contentious, the fragmentary and often conflicting mediation of her anti-racism message across multiple genres highlights the lack of intersectionality in a model of liberation that does not adequately address the politics of gender and sexuality.

The "Sister Souljah Moment"

Souljah's own history within public discourse reveals the liberatory effects of Black women's resistant participation. Souljah was briefly a member of the radical hip-

hop group Public Enemy, appearing on several tracks with the group. As a solo artist, she released only one album, the commercially unsuccessful *360 Degrees of Power* (1992). Despite being consistently referred to as a rapper or “rap singer” in the press, Souljah largely made her name based on her community activism in Harlem in the early 1990s. Her connections to the hip-hop community were critical to the visibility of her activist endeavours, and from 1995-2007 she was the executive director of Sean “Diddy” Combs’s youth-focused non-profit Daddy’s House Social Programs, Inc. (Souljah, Biography; Gardner). Souljah’s voice has been a powerful one with the ability to bridge the worlds of activism and hip-hop culture through her experiential knowledge, making anti-racist ideology accessible to young people of color. Her boisterousness about issues of race in America vaulted her into mainstream political consciousness. In the summer of 1992 alone she was mentioned in the A section of the *New York Times* nearly thirty times, often as part of the paper’s “The 1992 Campaign” series which followed then-presidential candidate Bill Clinton’s run for office. In May 1992, Souljah was questioned by *Washington Post* reporter David Mills about her reaction to the LA riots, which followed the acquittal of four LA police officers standing trial for the videotaped beating of Rodney King. Souljah reportedly made the following remarks to the *Washington Post* after the riots:

I mean, if black people kill black people every day, why not have a week and kill white people? You understand what I’m saying? In other words, white people, this government and that mayor were well aware of the fact that black people were dying every day in Los Angeles under gang violence. So if you’re a gang member and you would normally be killing somebody, why not kill a white person? Do you think that somebody thinks that white people are better, or above dying when they would kill their own kind? (Mills, “Sister Souljah’s Call to Arms”)

Souljah's controversial remarks in the interview were cited and reprinted in nearly one thousand news publications worldwide. Jesse Jackson, whose non-profit Rainbow Coalition had recently hosted her as a speaker, defended Souljah, insisting that she had been misquoted. Weeks after the original quote had been widely circulated and discussed, the *Washington Post* released a portion of the transcript in question. As is clear in the transcript, the context around her remarks was left out. The transcript shows the exchange as follows:

Q: A lot of people look at the violence that was unleashed and say...let's talk now about white America and middle-class black America -- will see the videos of the looting, the burning, people with their kids walking away with merchandise, people shooting at firemen, and think, you know, "Thank God for the police, because the police is what separates us and our property and our safety and our lives from them, because look what they're capable of."

Sister Souljah: They [middle-class blacks] do not represent the majority of black people, number one. Black people from the underclass and the so-called lower class do not respect the institutions of white America, which is why you can cart as many black people out on the television as you want to tell people in the lower and underclass that that was stupid, but they don't care what you say. You don't care about their lives, haven't added anything to the quality of their lives, haven't affected anything for the quality of their lives, and then expect them to respond to your opinions which mean absolutely nothing? Why would they?

Q. But even the people themselves who were perpetrating that violence, did they think it was wise? Was that wise, reasoned action?

A. Yeah, it was wise... [section quoted in previous *Post* article appears here]

Q. I'm just asking what's the wisdom in it? What's the sense in it?

A. It's rebellion, it's revenge. You ever heard of Hammurabi's Code? Eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth? It's revenge. I mean, that seems so simple. I don't even understand why anybody [would] ask me that question. You

take something from me, I take something from you. You cut me, I cut you. You shoot me, I shoot you. You kill my mother, I kill your mother. (Souljah, “In Her Own Disputed Words”)

Souljah’s raw sentiment attempts to draw attention to differences in class amongst African Americans, to media representation of black-on-black crime as mundane, and to the unintelligibility of victims of gang violence as human beings with grievable lives.³⁸ She was not, as the original article suggested, simply advocating for Black people to go out and kill whites but was speculating on the reasoning the rioters may have been following in response to a history of oppression and invisibility. The mediation of her message, which removed the context of American racial tensions, led to the swift and easy dismissal of her critique in public discourse. Candidate Clinton soon publicly called her a racist, going as far as likening her to David Duke, a racist white nationalist and former grand wizard of the white American terrorist group the Ku Klux Klan (Edsall). As a result of Clinton’s repudiation of her, which was coined a “Sister Souljah moment,” Souljah’s visibility in mainstream political consciousness as a particularly troublesome and socially transgressive figure was solidified.

Souljah, the Activist and Rapper

Souljah’s visibility, authorial success, and impassioned, willful character make her a remarkable figure in hip-hop culture. Through her use of popular media to engage in cultural debates, Souljah has positioned herself as a public figure with a primary stance against racism, making her voice a troublesome one in a popular discourse that often

³⁸ Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life* addresses ‘ungrievable’ lives in the context of war and, although the urban condition in America is not within the context of nationally defined war, I would argue that such conditions often appear as war-like life or death contests for urban residents with few resources.

devalues Black subjectivity and sees “being female” as “a natural disposition” (J. Butler, *Gender Trouble* xxviii). Yet, as I will later argue, there is also risk in the elevation of her voice: the reiteration of oppressive language of homophobia and advocating of gender inequity in her fictional and non-fictional work create a different kind of troublesomeness for anti-oppression politics. As an activist, Souljah is quite deliberate in her attempts to use popular media such as music and Black popular fiction as teaching tools. In fact, her engagements with hip-hop music and culture started as didactic projects. She was invited to become a member of the highly political and often controversial rap group Public Enemy in the early 1990s because of her forthrightness about race and racism in America, and her brief stint as a solo recording artist was marked by controversy over the content of her music and videos. Her songs were often pro-Black, anti-white polemics delivered in a mostly spoken word style over hard-hitting beats and included lyrics with detailed vengeful shifts in power that would place white people under the harsh conditions of slavery or subject them to complete annihilation.

It can be argued that Souljah’s musical outputs were primarily vehicles used to deliver her anti-racism message rather than the creative pursuits of an artist invested in exploring and pushing the boundaries of art through a hip-hop aesthetic. In *Billboard* magazine, one columnist describes Souljah’s poetics as “never remarkable” and adds, “The way she screams many of her lines may be fine for the lecture circuit ... but in a jam her street-warrior delivery alienates the very audience she’s trying to reach—black youth. She bores them” (Nelson). David Mills, the *Washington Post* writer who would later publish the article that caused the political uproar, also reviewed her album *360*

Degrees of Power in April 1992, noting that she did not seem “interested in redefining herself as an artist or an entertainer” and ventured to call her a “professional haranguer” (“On the Edge”). Mills, after having met Souljah at an event where her most radical Black nationalist rhetoric was absent, wondered: “Who made the marketing decision to stress her most belligerent self?” (“On the Edge”). The critical response to her music, hinged partly on the race and gender-specific stereotype of the angry Black woman, highlights Souljah’s interest in being primarily a public spokesperson on matters of race and racism in America while working to also undermine her message. The tone of the critical response to Souljah’s music rest upon assumptions about “proper” forms of performance and political engagement that, as Richard Iton notes, work to discredit women’s voices within hip-hop and public discourse (276). Though the album may have been a commercial failure, her brief rap career raised her profile as a public figure.

Writer Yvonne Bynoe refers to Souljah as a “raptivist,” or, essentially, a rap artist who dabbles in activism on the side (ix). Bynoe largely avoids mentioning people by name in her book *Stand and Deliver*, but Souljah is one name she does mention in her critique of so-called raptivists. According to Bynoe,

The chief problem with raptivists is that while socially conscious rap artists articulated the inequalities and discriminatory policies still targeted toward African-Americans and Latinos, these artists for the most part did not follow up their declarations with programs to facilitate substantive changes. (x)

Bynoe’s singling out of Souljah as a raptivist is peculiar as Souljah’s primary goal was not to be a celebrated musical performer but to be a hip-hop generation activist. Bynoe is also generally critical of the potential of hip-hop as a viable political movement and too

quickly dismisses the possibilities for intervention within cultural dialogue that can come about through music and other creative media. Souljah's expressed intentions were to use hip-hop as a mobilizing force for creating political change largely because she recognized the power of the popular to reach the masses.

Finding Shelter in The Coldest Winter Ever

With *The Coldest Winter Ever*, Souljah chose a format that can be remarkably effective at reaching young women of the hip-hop era. The popular genre of street literature provides an accessible platform from which to reach youth populations. The novel uses first-person narration and allows Winter to tell her story in her own way. As she says, "Let me take my time and tell my story" (1). In the opening dedication of *The Coldest Winter Ever* Souljah writes,

This novel is dedicated to the era in which we live. The era in which love, loyalty, truth, honor and respect died. Where humility and appreciation are nonexistent. Where families are divided and God reviled / The era. The Coldest Winter Ever. (n.p.)

As is characteristic of many street literature texts like Teri Woods's *True to the Game* and Sapphire's *Push*, this is not a novel full of hope, of inspiration, or of offering ways of repairing what is broken—it is offered as a cautionary tale or a catalogue of the neglect of often poor, racialized populations. However, in figuring herself as an activist within the novel, Souljah demonstrates some self-reflexivity about the gulf between her hope as an activist and her cynicism as an observer, particularly in her ostensible teaching moments. In the novel, Souljah, the activist character, is described as one who is at once in and out of touch with the streets and people she desires to help. At a community event, Winter questions Souljah's cultural capital as someone attuned to the youth: "How is this bitch

supposed to help the community when she don't even know how to rock her shit?," she asks (157). Winter's assertion that Souljah is the only one in "some kind of struggle"—everyone Winter knows is "chilling, just tryna enjoy life" (31)—ironically underscores the gap between Souljah's rhetorical approach and her intended audience. It is Winter, the protagonist, who voices a knowledge of "the streets" as a physical and ideological space and points out the disconnect she sees between Souljah's approach to activism and her lived reality—an act that signals some level of dialogism for Souljah the writer.

Winter says that all she herself knows is life in the projects of the city. Her knowledge of the streets is so intimate that she "[knows] these streets like [she knows] the curves of [her] own body" (14). Winter's likening of urban space to her own body offers an unconventional representation of Black womanhood, one that challenges Souljah's characterization of women out on the streets as a violation of the mandate of respectable Black womanhood in *No Disrespect*. In *No Disrespect*, Souljah loses respect for her mother because of her ventures outside of the home that were necessitated by the need to provide for her family. In *The Coldest Winter Ever*, the street is a space of freedom, adventure, and sometimes danger. Winter's re-presentation of the streets as intelligible to her, and hence other women, re-inscribes the city as a knowable space that is not exclusively the domain of masculinity. Winter openly challenges the assumption of men who "always think when they see a girl walking alone in the street they can slide up in her" by declaring that her sexual choices are always her own (215). The ability to escape the confines of public housing – structures that are often prison-like in feel and appearance – is an important part of life for urban dwellers. When Winter is forced to

leave the projects for a suburban life in Long Island, a place she sees as deathly silent and lacking a communal feel (19), it is the affluent, upper-middle-class domestic space that becomes a jail she will do anything to escape from, including disobeying her beloved father. For Winter, leaving the projects also means leaving behind the community or closeness offered by the city. Similarly, Souljah's own ground-breaking experiences as a woman in the male-dominated spaces of hip-hop music and street literature attest to the generative possibilities of Black women defying rules of propriety that seek to confine them to more so-called feminine spaces of domesticity and silence.

Souljah's textual representation of her activist self attempts to reconcile the gulf between herself and a "regular" Harlem girl (60), embodied by Winter. Gwendolyn Pough reads Souljah's representation of the "ghetto girl's life" as one that "not only looks at oppression but also takes into consideration issues of complicity" and argues that Souljah offers Winter's story as a way into a critique about materialism within hip-hop culture (144-145). The materialism of hip-hop culture is closely tied to the ideals of the American Dream. As Pough states, "Winter just wants her piece of the American Pie" (146). Her choices to follow in her father's footsteps and her resistance to Sister Souljah's message of empowerment are presented as foreseeable conclusions, given Souljah's inability to change Winter's ideas about how power looks and feels. Winter's resistance to both Souljah's knowledge and attempts to connect with her are detailed in her description of Souljah as being uptight and the only one in "a struggle" with racism (30). Winter even suggests that Souljah go "back to Africa" when she hears her talking about African ancestors and their proverbs (43). Winter is characterized as a girl

uninterested in learning how to be a Black woman from Souljah, mostly because she is jealous of Souljah and her ability to attract the attention of men Winter herself desires. The silent feud between Winter and Souljah demonstrates, symptomatically, the intimate effect of a heteropatriarchy that pits women against each other in competition for male attention and the roadblocks it creates for Black feminist goals of support and empowerment in the era of hip-hop. But, where Winter has youth and beauty on her side, Souljah has power. That Winter's first encounters with Souljah are one-sided in the form of radio broadcasts grants Souljah's voice a level of authority. When Winter finally sees a picture of Souljah she is struck by their shared likeness as ordinary Harlem girls. Yet, this moment of recognition does not inspire a sense of connection; instead, Winter is Souljah's harshest critic, and even derides her for her poor taste in clothing (157, 237). Winter is also suspicious of Souljah's intentions and questions why she charges fees for those who wish to attend her speaking engagements if she is truly interested in helping people: "Souljah gets paid. You get nothing" (196). Winter warns another girl who is captivated by Souljah: "You should never just follow somebody the way you follow Souljah. Just think how disappointed you would have been if she turned out to be a hypocrite" (207). This self-reflexive framing is indicative of the kinds of challenges potentially met by activists from those they hope to reach. In addition, Winter's critical perspective can also be read as a potential model for readers to be cautious in their own meaning-making practices—an especially useful admonition for media and cultural awareness.

Souljah and Black Women's Autobiographical Histories of Resistance

As part of a recuperative project to repair the media damage done to her reputation during the 1992 presidential campaign, Souljah released her autobiography *No Disrespect* (1996), which precedes *The Coldest Winter Ever* by three years. It offers valuable insight into the formative life experiences and circumstances that helped shape her Black nationalist political identity. The training she receives from her Africana studies degree program and experience in the Black church in registering her dissent is extremely valuable, exemplifying what Johnnie Stover calls “flagrant resistance” demonstrated through the literary tools of irony, sass/insolence/impudence, backtalking, rage, and invective (149). Often, merely raising one’s voice as a Black woman is seen as a transgressive and troubling act. As Richard Douglass-Chin states,

Speaking out becomes a public event, and the black woman a spectacle, a doubly negative example (as black, as woman) for all other black women who might attempt similar action. Thus, it is silence that seems safest; in fact, it is silence that is *demanded* of black women. (183)

Souljah’s voice is troubling for its presence precisely because it is a voice that refuses to adhere to the demand of silence. In “A Note to the Readers,” Souljah writes:

My closest friends consider me soft-spoken. Others say I have a deadly tongue. And while it’s true that I have a spicy attitude like most of the ghetto girls I know, I back it up with a quick, precise, and knowledgeable mind. (*No Disrespect* ix)

She emphasizes how writing an autobiography and being an orator extends beyond the normal boundaries of her character, and thus takes on the role of pseudo-spokesperson for other “ghetto girls.” As Joanne Braxton posits, “Black women’s autobiography is ... an occasion for viewing the individual in relation to those others with whom she shares

emotional, philosophical, and spiritual affinities, as well as political realities” (9).

Souljah’s characterization of herself as “like most of the ghetto girls” and the use of rhetorical strategies of flagrant resistance fit within interpretations of Black women’s autobiography. As Stover argues,

African American women’s autobiographical texts represented the many ways in which the black woman, the person thought to have the least voice, managed to put forth powerful statements under the guise of an African American mother tongue, giving her, paradoxically, the greatest voice because it was a voice that white society dismissed as being inconsequential. (60)

Souljah’s text builds on this tradition and engages in flagrant resistance more openly than Black women writers of previous generations could have as formerly enslaved or more openly oppressed women who experienced higher levels of social vulnerability.³⁹ Her stance as a rebel is one that Sidonie Smith describes as “necessary for preserving [the black girl’s] individuality and affirming her self-worth” (131). The foremothers of Black women’s autobiography paved the way for voices like Souljah’s to not only be heard, but to be taken seriously within public discourse.

Souljah’s autobiography is framed by endorsements from a handful of publications that vouch for her as a writer and a passionate, caring activist and offer views of her character that differ from her preceding public reputation. The *Arizona Star* notes this is “a kinder, gentler Souljah” while the *Atlanta Journal* offers, “Souljah is not driven by hatred, as her detractors have implied, but by love” (qtd. in *No Disrespect*, n.

³⁹ For example, Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) was published prior to the abolishment of slavery and Jacobs had to conceal her true identity for her safety and the safety of others. Similarly, Assata Shakur’s *Assata: an Autobiography* (1987) also engages in strategic silence in protection of Shakur and others.

p.). Though this text endeavours to repair her reputation and credibility, Souljah herself does not seem particularly interested in treading lightly. Instead, she sassily declares, “I have no apologies. At least not to any of you. Only to God. I intend no disrespect” (xvi). The framing of the autobiographical narrative as one that does not seek to comfort its intended audience while describing the politicization of an individual aligns *No Disrespect* with the autobiographies of revolutionary figures like Assata Shakur and Angela Y. Davis.⁴⁰ Autobiographical texts from such Black women activists are characterized as political autobiographies (as coined by Davis in her autobiography), which Margo Perkins describes as “resistance literature” that, while being narratively tied to one’s personal struggle, primarily seeks to draw attention to the movement or larger cause (7). Despite some similarities that would link the radical outlook evident in the Davis or Shakur texts to the political resistance mounted in *No Disrespect*, Souljah’s autobiography is not a political one; I characterize her text as quasi-political as it is more an account of her personal ordeals than of an articulated liberation struggle that addresses systems of oppression.

The limitation of her view of the personal, which is filtered through heteropatriarchal frames of reference, is evident when Souljah writes, “By exposing my experiences and the experiences of many of the people around me, I hope and pray that many African men and women will gain an understanding of love and life, that they will have a chance to save themselves the pain of ignorance” (*No Disrespect* xv). The

⁴⁰ See Angela Y. Davis, *Angela Davis: an Autobiography*. New York: International Publishers, 1974; Assata Shakur, *Assata: an Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987.

structure of her autobiography reifies the disjuncture between personal reflection and sustained critiques of political systems that the intersectionality of Black feminism encourages. Each chapter is dedicated to a person—family member, friend, roommate, or lover—who taught Souljah a life lesson in some way. By grounding her appeal to a dominant public sphere in personal reflection, she positions herself as a young Black woman with split family relations that later inform her relationships in life, while also offering a more sympathetic representation of her for a reading public that may be predisposed to hold a one-dimensional view of her as an angry Black woman. Her personal experiences and the experiences of others are not presented within the context of a systematic critique that elucidates the link between the personal and the collective political. Consequently, the foremost purpose of the text—to repair her reputation and offer context for her specific politics—hinders the development of a sustained critique of racism and racist institutions like that of the work of Shakur, Davis, or Harriet Jacobs, for example. In many ways, the patriarchal lean to Souljah’s Black nationalist ideology undermines her own authority and the power of Black women’s voices by placing restrictive norms around Black women’s political agency, effectively minimizing or even eliminating the kind of role within political discourse that Souljah herself seeks to fill.

The history to which Souljah is linked through her presence within a public sphere offers an important context for my argument about the liberatory effect of her speech. In her article “Black Women Writers and the Trouble with Ethos: Harriet Jacobs, Billie Holiday, and Sister Souljah,” Coretta Pittman explains why Black women writers must take such care to defend their character to a mainstream public. Pittman argues that

American society, which is overwhelmingly an audience outside of Black women's home communities, "continually questions [Black women's] moral character" (44). She explains how the classical Aristotelian model of ethos, which relies on the ideals of a community or nation to determine one's character, is unproductive as a rhetorical model when applied to Black women writers: "Acquiring a positive ethos becomes problematic given that a classical model such as Aristotle's excludes their lived realities and experiences as black women living in a slave and post-slavery society" (43). This rhetorical model, like much public sphere theory, assumes an equality among subjectivities that is simply non-existent, an assumption Christina Sharpe carefully and critically debunks in her analysis of the alienating condition of "post-slavery subjects" (3). Sharpe argues the "post-slavery subjectivity is largely borne by and readable on the (New World) *black* subject" (3). "Post-slavery subjects," which are "those subjectivities constituted from transatlantic slavery onward and connected, then as now, by the everyday mundane horrors that aren't acknowledged to be horrors" (3), face a peculiar challenge in asserting an ethos of Black womanhood against a contrasting (often white) background. In her analysis of visual artist Kara Walker's black silhouettes exhibit, Sharpe suggests that the act of looking at slavery and post-slavery subjects "can mean encountering shame and violence and sometimes refusing this representation or sometimes being seduced into and complicit with violent acts of reading, seeing, naming, and fixing into stereotype" (156). As Sharpe notes, looking at or acknowledging these subjects "means engaging with the disfigurations of black survival that we would prefer to look away from" (156). As both Pittman and Sharpe highlight, the burden of

representation within everyday life for “post-slavery subjects” poses challenges of recognition within a predominately white American public sphere that views such subjects as marginal.

In the broad history of African American women’s writing, the act of writing has been a productive one that “recreated positive self-images and, eventually, the image of black women” (Pittman 50). This recreation is dependent upon the establishment of a new set of expectations for Black womanhood—one that accounts for what Pittman appropriately encapsulates as the navigation of the “social and cultural terrain in racist and hostile environments” (51). In this new articulation, the virtuous Black woman is characterized as one who is different, strong, resilient, witty, astute, tough, and street smart—all characteristics Souljah highlights with regard to herself in her autobiography. Pittman describes Souljah’s versatile public presence as a full-pronged attempt to “dispel the myth that she and other inner city adult black women [are] immoral and intellectually inferior” (63). In a clear articulation of this stance, Souljah turns her critique outward to take advantage of her publicity in the last chapter of her autobiography and speaks directly to her intended audience: the current youth generation.

Fighting Oppression with Oppression: On the Need for Intersectional Critique

No Disrespect, in particular, demonstrates the tensions between the liberatory effect of speaking for oneself as Black woman and the political risks of the limited intersectional troublesome voice Souljah represents. The text positions the destruction of Black families as the most pressing problem in the Black community: “And, most of all, I raged, if slavery had been ‘overdramatized and oversold,’ why then had millions of

African people found it so hard to knit their lives, psyches, and families back together again” (100). In her effort to solve the problem of psychic and familial rupture, Souljah distributes blame for the destruction in a number of places, starting back with slavery. Souljah characterizes and condemns ‘pathological’ women and homosexuality as the productions of white supremacy that have “shaped the mind-set of both our African men and women, creating a people who are not living the way we would *naturally* and *culturally* live” (emphasis added, 213).⁴¹ Self-supporting Black women, characterized as usurpers of intimate power, and non-heteronormative sexualities are presented as destructive forces working against patriarchal Black nationalist familial structures that deem dependent women and dominant heterosexual men as the only respectable subjects. From this perspective, homosexuality and Black women who do not live up to the political or sexual behaviour standards of Black nationalism contribute to the undermining of heteropatriarchy, which is essential for the efficacy of the Black family. Though Souljah’s writings are under analysis here, I want to avoid reading her as an individual holding these views and instead situate her voice within a system of cultural beliefs or realities often attributed to Black urban life—a voice that is drawn from both within and outside Black public spheres. Many of her rhetorical strategies reiterate troubling twentieth-century discourse that pathologizes Black women as creators of domestic dysfunction. For example, instead of holding Black men accountable for their

⁴¹ The assertion that homosexuality was somehow imported to Africa has been critically debunked as a myth with historical evidence in light of the persecution of gay people in some African countries. For example, see Bernadine Evaristo’s essay, “The idea that African homosexuality was a colonial import is a myth,” *The Guardian*, March 8, 2014 available at <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/08/african-homosexuality-colonial-import-myth>.

roles within family structures, Souljah suggest the sharing of men as a path to the emotional repair of Black families:

It occurred to me, based on everything I had experienced, that we African women, were, actually, all sharing our men. But most of us turned a blind eye to that fact. After all, wasn't it the deceit, trickery, and manipulation men engaged in that put a knife in our lungs? Wasn't it the everyday deceit that took our breath away and assassinated our spirit? The thought that you were loving a person who you thought you knew but obviously didn't? So I decided that I was willing to share a man with another willing sister as long as it was honest. (*No Disrespect* 317)

This solution, which is thought of as a way to avoid or minimize the hurt of Black women, works in favour of a male-centered reorienting of the family structure and is closely aligned with dominant representations of Black women as usurpers of familial power. It also works to validate the view that matriarchal Black family structures are pathological because of their leadership. Consequently, despite presenting herself as an advocate for the well-being of young Black women, Souljah reifies the same damaging stereotypes and images of Black women as Sapphires—perniciously willful, undermining, and overbearing—she seeks to work against.

Without the tools of Black feminist thought, seeing the intersecting effects of patriarchy becomes a difficult task. Sharpe's articulation of "monstrous intimacies"—that "set of known and unknown performances and inhabited horrors, desires and positions produced, reproduced, circulated, and transmitted" (3)—draws attention to the sense of emotional and psychic injury that shapes much of *No Disrespect*. In fact, Souljah dedicates the text to "a new era of understanding and action, rooted in honest, open, and sometimes painful talk between people" (*No Disrespect* n.p.). The histories of racist and

sexist assaults against Black subjectivities cast shadows on the encounters described in the text, leading Souljah to highlight whiteness as a causal source of trauma for Black subjects. The dominant representation of Black women as in need of moral defense, in particular, is intimately tied to notions of respectability, which Trimiko Melancon characterizes as “narrow constructions and outmoded dictates” governing gender and sexuality that “succeed, paradoxically, in doing the precise opposite of their strategic design: they endanger and compromise rather than protect or advance various individuals – especially women – and the very community itself” (5). As a result of this history, prevailing notions of responsibility and respectability in the lives of Black women remain important shapers of subjectivity in Souljah’s and other hip-hop generation women’s writing. In reference to this context, Candice Jenkins notes,

[W]omen have historically been understood as the gender most responsible for maintaining domestic and sexual decorum—a Victorian convention that in the case of black women has also served as a marker of racial inadequacy, given persistent assumptions in American culture that black women are incapable of appropriate domestic and sexual comportment. In addition, and perhaps as a result of this history, intimacy in general has continually been understood within black culture itself to be a women’s issue. (32-3)

Focusing on how Black women’s texts are shaped by this inherited discourse here and elsewhere in this dissertation offers insight into workings of intimacy in the private and social lives of hip-hop generation Black women.

The chapter “Mother,” which begins Souljah’s autobiography, sets a trend of divisiveness and competition amongst Souljah and other women, primarily for the attention of men. Patricia Hill Collins argues that mother-daughter identification, in particular, is problematic under patriarchy because men are more highly valued than

women. She writes that, “while daughters identify with their mothers, they also reject them because, in patriarchal families, identification with adult women as mothers means identifying with persons deemed inferior” (“The Meaning of Motherhood” 7). The “violent acts of reading, seeing, naming, and fixing into stereotype” described by Sharpe (156) are especially striking in *No Disrespect*. In what I find to be a telling structuring of Souljah’s (life) story, each chapter that is dedicated to a woman in her life presents views of Black women as damaged, pathological, and unworthy of love, sympathy, or praise—injurious representations that are all too prevalent in public discourse. The only lessons the women in Souljah’s life have taught her, according to this text, are the negative consequences that are inevitable when Black women resist their designated roles within a patriarchal structure or violate the rules of respectability.

The primacy of the “Mother” chapter reinforces Collins’s understanding of the mother-daughter relationship as a fundamental one among Black women (*Black Feminist Thought* 96). Souljah’s strained relationship with her mother arguably influences her ability to relate or look to women for support in navigating the difficult terrain of life particular to Black women. Her disappointment with her own mother is clear when she declares, “She was America’s creation and that did not belong to me” (50). This sentiment, especially the disowning of the Black mother figure, leads me to question how much the demands of the nation (in both view of the state and of Black nationalism) take precedent over the needs of the domestic space. This splitting of domestic responsibility and political allegiance also presupposes dysfunction and pathology. In Souljah’s case, her mother, when left without a husband or state body to depend on, must venture outside

of the home to materially provide for her children and avoid being labelled a welfare queen. The work she does is critical to her family's survival, and yet, as Sharpe notes of the Black mammy figure, those who benefit from it, and are constituted by it, are often "unable to see it" or "refuse to acknowledge it" (164). Souljah blames the toxicity of American culture for alienating her from her mother. These same conditions, however, do not limit Souljah's forgiving attitude towards Black men, like her father, who have fallen short of her ideal of the strong Black man. Though in both cases she acknowledges the ill effects of a toxic system of racist oppression, she still advocates for the empowerment of Black men as they are savable and worth saving in accordance with the needs of a masculine-led Black nationalism. She does not hold such a forgiving view of the women around her, whom she judges as being somehow more responsible for their assumed shortcomings and as thus bearing a greater responsibility to save themselves. The most damning evidence of this bias is encapsulated in Souljah's question, "How do you not end up consciously, or subconsciously, a whore, literally or figuratively a whore like your momma?" (*No Disrespect* 5). This is a striking revelation of her disdain for what her mother represents and reveals her own "matrphobia" or "fear of becoming what [her] mother had been" (Braxton 3). Souljah's loathing of the conditions of Black womanhood in America is displaced onto the motherly body that is closest to her own rather than being directed to society for its mistreatment and neglect of Black women.

It is important to place Souljah's representation of her mother within the distinctly American tradition of placing blame for familial troubles squarely on the shoulders of

Black, and often single, mothers. Jenkins offers an important contextualization of this tendency as being part of a hopeful patriarchy:

This sense that the ‘bad black mother’ is ultimately *responsible* for the black family’s political and ideological meaning remains consistent even with respect to the dreamed-of black patriarch, always on the verge of heroic (re)appearance. Who, after all, need ‘permit’ (recalling Bayard Rustin’s words) black men to take their rightful places at the ‘head of the family,’ except the black wife and mother, usurper at the table of intimate power? (90)

Jenkins points to the “table of intimate power” as a site of gender struggle where the emasculation of Black men in American society is taken as grounds for entitlement to a dominant role within the intimate, domestic space. Souljah’s recollection of the breakup of her family gives credence to the sense of displacement described by Jenkins as she recalls her father disappearing from her life because of an argument with her mother after losing his job. Civil Rights icon Bayard Rustin, whom Jenkins evokes, once suggested that “we can all accept” the thesis that the “Negro family can be reconstructed only when the Negro male is permitted to be the economic and psychological head of the family” (418). The stance taken by Rustin in 1966 is reiterated in *No Disrespect*. Souljah’s curt description of her father’s reaction to losing his job and his subsequent behaviour offers what may be a glimpse of his mental illness. She notes that his “mental health began to erode” and her mother, becoming frightened of his seemingly “senseless ramblings” (7), moved herself and children to a new residence. Despite hints at deeper issues within her parents’ marriage, Souljah seemingly suggests that if it had not been for her mother’s resistance to staying with her father at all cost, their family would not have been torn apart. As she tells her mother, “Daddy wanted to love you. Circumstances destroyed him”

(47). Prior to the demise of their marriage, her mother, Souljah notes, was “an excellent cook and fully prepared to serve her man” as a “willing student for [her] father’s philosophy of dependency” (6). After her divorce, her mother enters the workforce and carries on with her dating life and this necessary independence is read as a spiteful resistance. Once Souljah discovers her mother has a white boyfriend, she accuses her of being a whore. The conflict Souljah finds with her mother after the demise of their nuclear family is framed by the rhetoric of Black nationalism that views the Black (heteronormative) family as the conduit for liberation. As Abdur-Rahman argues, “When adhering to essentialist, masculinist programs of racial uplift, African American men *and* women inadvertently validate the ethos – and participate in the practice – of dominance” (126). As the remaining parent, Souljah’s mother bears the responsibility of setting an example for her children, while Souljah’s absent father shares no such burden and can figuratively remain a mostly unsullied hero with an open-ended chance to reclaim his role as the head of the family. However, the path towards liberation outlined by Black nationalist movements does not have an intersectional approach to the kinds of oppression felt by Black women as such movements seek only to trouble the racist attitudes toward Black people in America while gender-based oppression remains untroubled.

Where Race, Gender, and Sexuality Intersect

Through the eyes of Winter, Souljah creates a vision of herself as the object of desire of powerful men and the object of other young women’s jealousy. Souljah’s description of her character draws attention to the material markers of success: her

Harlem Sugar Hill brownstone (decorated with Afrocentric art), her luxury car, and a well-known recording artist whom Winter desires to be seen with contribute to her self-image as respectable and desirable (243).⁴² Just before Winter offers this vision of her, Sister Souljah tells Winter, “Jealous people are usually so intensely dissatisfied with themselves that they have a burning desire to destroy anyone who has something they want, but feel they can’t have” (239). By framing Winter’s response in a way that focuses on conspicuous signs of success, Souljah ironically offers a critique of consumerist desire through hip-hop reference points.

The fictional reproduction of competition between mentor Souljah and mentee Winter points to a failure to recognize commonalities, one that results in a cultural and political distancing in the novel. The significance of such recognition becomes even more fundamental when considering the challenges faced by hip-hop feminist projects. As Nellie McKay writes,

[I]n the struggle against oppressive sexual and racial authority, the black female self stands at once alongside and apart from white women and black men, joined to the struggles of each but separated from both in a system that still privileges whiteness and maleness. (75-6)

In the face of both sexually and racially oppressive structures, Black women are challenged to amplify parts of their subjectivity that seek to divide them along lines of gender and race. The stymying effect of rivalry is clear in the fictional relationship between Winter and Souljah. In the novel, Winter stays with Souljah for a brief time but

⁴² The Sugar Hill section of Harlem has great historical significance as the site where many notable African Americans lived during the Harlem Renaissance and onward. Home to African American cultural elites, the name “Sugar Hill” was meant to characterize it as part of the so-called sweet life. For more, see <http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr//feature/afam/2003/features.htm>.

avoids interacting with her in any way that will expose her vulnerability. Winter goes by the pseudonym “Sasha” and repeatedly tries to avoid attending the “womanhood meetings” held by Souljah (271). When Winter does finally attend, she refuses to share her story and cry alongside the other young women in attendance, all the while thinking,

I hated the way [Souljah] thought she could get into everybody’s personal business. I hated whatever it was in her that gave her the nerve to say out loud what everyone else thought, but had sense not to mention. (262)

In Souljah’s fictional representation of her attempt at a young women-focused activism, it is the resistance of the young woman that prevents a meaningful discussion and transformation. Similarly, in *No Disrespect*, Souljah condemns young Black women and men for refusing to “talk about all of these obvious but crucial issues” and instead choosing to “wander around in stupidity and ignorance” (xi). In *Willful Subjects* Sara Ahmed argues that “[breaking] free from duty is narrated as willfulness, wandering away from the right path” (116). As Winter’s resistance reveals, the choice of when to speak and to whom is framed by the sphere of engagement and its dynamics of power. Souljah renders Winter’s resistance as pathological while viewing her own sense of willful resistance as being for the common good, speaking “what everyone else thought, but had sense not to mention” (*The Coldest Winter Ever* 262). Souljah’s characterization of Winter’s youthfully ignorant and selfish willfulness works to valorize Souljah’s own willfulness to speak on behalf of others for the common good. This splitting of Black female subjectivity works to validate Souljah’s brand of willfulness while condemning Winter to exclusion for her punishable willfulness, ironically demonstrating the path to activist inefficacy.

The differentiation between the willfulness displayed by Winter versus that of Souljah sets up a clear hierarchy of resistance where Souljah's will is proper, that is, aligned with the rhetoric and goals of heteropatriarchal Black nationalism. Mae Gwendolyn Henderson describes the exploration of the intersectional challenges in Black women's autobiography as "public or competitive discourses," arguing that "black women enter competitive discourse with black men as women, with white women as blacks, and with white men as black women" (346). The narrative in *The Coldest Winter Ever* demonstrates how liberation rhetoric along only racial lines can obscure the competitive discourse that can also occur amongst Black women. In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, bell hooks argues that male supremacist values feed this kind of competitive and divisive behaviour among women. She writes, "While sexism teaches women to be sex objects for men, it is also manifest when women who have repudiated this role feel contemptuous and superior in relation to those women who have not" (48). In *No Disrespect* Souljah admits to being covetous of a friend's attractiveness to men, describing it as "a power I wanted to have" (145). This somewhat self-reflexive depiction of feelings of competitiveness and social or intellectual superiority over other women and righteous willfulness read as enactments of the exact behaviour hooks describes.

Even though Souljah is not representing herself in a way that leaves her vulnerable to questioning her respectability, the burden of representation extends to her disapproval or endorsement of the actions of other Black women whose perspectives are absent from the autobiography of Souljah's life. The tendency to condemn women who express sexual behaviours that do not reflect the ideals of respectable Black womanhood

can be understood in the context of what Jenkins identifies as the “salvific wish,” a pattern of desire that requires “the concealment and restraint of [Black women’s] bodies, for the ultimate ‘safety’ of the black community as a whole” (13-14).⁴³ The women represented in *No Disrespect* and *The Coldest Winter Ever* are subjected to the violence of the “salvific wish” identified by Jenkins as a “restrictive, disciplinary assault upon black bodies,” which “constitutes a fearful denial of not simply black intimate expression, but of the chaos and vulnerability of human encounter more broadly conceived” (25). The burden of representation can often obscure the source of discord—binding stereotypes under heteropatriarchy that limit women to subjugated roles in public and intimate life—and create distress amongst women by masking how it is not the actions of another that determines our being but the assumption that the actions of one presupposes the subjectivity of all.

While Souljah’s position as a voice of power implicitly counters the kinds of gender-based limitations heteropatriarchal Black nationalism calls for, Souljah’s rhetoric in *No Disrespect* is heavily invested in Black nationalist thought, which is an insufficient path towards Black freedom. In the opening note to readers, Souljah details her purpose as the reshaping of the “backward and negative ... mainstream view and image of black people” (*No Disrespect* x). The power granted by publicity to influence or shape subjectivity for certain populations is implicit in this statement. Souljah is acutely aware of the authority she holds as a voice within mainstream public discourse granted a

⁴³ Jenkins acknowledges that this “salvific wish” also applies to Black men but to a much lesser extent. For my purposes here I only focus on its effects among Black women.

platform to do this kind of recuperative work. In public discourse, undoing damaging aspects of representation is equally as important as creating new images. She states she is concerned most with the “African female in America” (*No Disrespect* xiv); yet, this concern soon gives way to concern primarily for Black men. This is not incidental: in the Black nationalist view Souljah ascribes to, Black subjectivity is Black manhood and Black men are meant to be the “primary participants in legal, economic, and political matters” (Abdur-Rahman 98). As Collins asserts, “Racism is a gender-specific phenomenon, and Black antiracist politics that do not make gender central are doomed to fail because someone will always be left behind. If either women or men remain subordinated, then social injustice persists” (*Black Sexual Politics* 7). *No Disrespect* demonstrates the risk of advocating for an ideology that pursues Black liberation while simultaneously limiting Black women’s voices. The text trades the myth of Black women as usurpers of intimate power for the counter myth of Black liberation by way of heteropatriarchy.

Though *No Disrespect* is limited in its critique of the intersecting issues of race and sexuality, it does venture to raise the subject. When Mona, Souljah’s former college roommate, reveals herself as a lesbian, Souljah is forced to grapple with the question of her homophobia. She deflects by arguing that gay people use the term homophobic “to silence people who [do not] share their opinions and to excuse themselves from being questioned, criticized, or challenged” and later adds that their behaviour and attitudes are, in fact, “questionable” (215-6). Unfortunately, she continues her previous line of thinking

to further suggest homosexuality is a disorder stemming from some sort of abuse or trauma. In her explanation of Mona's so-called turn to lesbianism, Souljah writes,

There was an uneasiness within her that came out as a bitter anti-male sentiment, leading to a thoroughgoing cynicism toward life. She wasn't alone. There seemed to be a growing number of college girls who shared this outlook. Many, like Mona, had embraced a gay lifestyle. (212-3)

In this view, same-sex desire does not exist outside of the scope of heterosexuality—it only emerges as a fleeing from or rejection of it, serving as the opposite against which heterosexuality is defined. Souljah assumes that homosexuality is strictly a “lifestyle choice” one arrived at only after being shut out of heterosexual relationships. During one of her radio speeches in *The Coldest Winter Ever*, Souljah quotes statistics about young Black women having the highest rate of death due to AIDS (77), though the context of these numbers is not provided. This presents homophobic fears about “down-low brothers” and other anxieties about Black masculinity in ways that naturalize such views (*The Coldest Winter Ever* 259, 308). Here, Souljah's representative choice to express the paranoid rhetoric about “down-low brothers” as the cause of the AIDS crisis among Black women reiterates, without explicit critique, a troubling intolerance that encourages Black men to remain “in the closet” for fear of how others in their community will treat them.

Inattention to the interlocking oppressions of gender, race, and class that are pertinent to the AIDS crisis emerges as a source of contention that reflects more communally held beliefs based on readings of religious texts. As Collins describes:

Backed up by interpretations of biblical teachings, many churchgoing African Americans believe that homosexuality reflects varying combinations of: (1) the loss of male role models as a consequence of the

breakdown of the Black family structure, trends that in turn foster weak men, some of whom turn to homosexuality; (2) a loss of traditional religious values that encourage homosexuality among those who have turned away from the church; (3) the emasculation of Black men by White oppression; and (4) a sinister plot by White racists as a form of population genocide [...] .(*Black Sexual Politics* 108)

Many of these elements of loss form the foundation upon which Souljah mounts her critique of the Black American family structure. Souljah does make mention of the presence of the church in her upbringing but her seeming aversion to homosexuality is largely characterized by the combinational result of the broken Black family unit (which fosters weak men), the emasculatory effects of white oppression on Black men, and, as noted by Collins, the conspiracy theory-based genocidal tendency of homosexuality inferred from its non-(traditionally) reproductive unions. Abdur-Rahman posits that heteronormativity “ultimately organizes the family and centralizes masculinity in the service of patriarchal, civic, and political power,” thus making the family the “microcosm of the nation” (97). Consequently, Souljah’s vision for a healed Black community is deeply invested in heteronormative Black masculinity operating as the head of the table of intimate power. In the closing to *No Disrespect* she warns: “Do not believe that same-sex love will solve your problems” (357). Same-sex love, which is objectionable on the religious basis noted by Collins, is characterized as a problem, a roadblock on the path to a restored vision of heteropatriarchal Black families in America.

On Hearing One Another

... books help you to understand why what is happening is happening. Usually in life the same things are happening over and over again, in cycles, you know? And if it's not a good cycle, you got to understand it in order to make it stop.

-Sister Souljah in *The Coldest Winter Ever*

Souljah's narrative of Black womanhood in *The Coldest Winter Ever* is not free from the strictures of racialized and gendered oppression; however, it is possibly more representative of the troublesome realities readers may be familiar with. As the epigraph to this section implies, the reiteration of particular themes and narratives in books calls for critical investigation. What do Souljah's examples of the representation of oppressive language and action signify? As Chapter Two suggests, the negotiated ways in which readers may decode meaning from street literature texts prove to be just as powerful as any writerly intention or scholarly eye. Young women like Taryn and Kyra exemplify the reflective and critical capabilities of readers to interpret texts according to their own experience and perspective, rendering meaning-making for the hip-hop generation a dynamic discursive practice.

The Coldest Winter Ever, given its popularity as a *New York Times* bestseller with over a million copies sold, serves as a space for discussion about contemporary issues of urban life for young women of color. As Collins describes, the self-defining works of both Black women writers and musicians create safe spaces: "By advancing Black women's empowerment through self-definition, the safe spaces housing this culture of resistance help Black women resist the dominant ideology promulgated not only outside Black communities but within African-American institutions" (*Black Feminist Thought* 95). How are we to make sense of Souljah's contradictory rhetoric advancing ideas of oppressive family structures, reproduction, and sexuality within the context of creating safe spaces for survival and resistance? Souljah's work as an activist suggests a vested interest in the wellbeing of young Black women but, as her writings self-reflexively

reveal, there is a gulf between herself and other women. For young women looking to Souljah's work for guidance, making use of a hip-hop feminist sensibility—one that can account for the differences in experiences of young Black women in America—has the potential to strengthen intra-communal bonds with young women contemporaries.

Hip-hop feminism critically emphasizes the point that lived realities matter. As Kimberlé Crenshaw argues in her seminal article on intersectionality in Black women's lives, "theories and strategies purporting to reflect the Black community's needs must include an analysis of sexism and patriarchy" (166). Crenshaw's contention, alongside the Combahee River Collective's assertion that the synthesis of interlocking systems of oppressions "creates the conditions of [Black women's] lives" (264) remains relevant, especially in light of the recent entrenchment of intersectionality as an academic concept removed from such realities in which "thinking about liberation often slips into single-axis logics and false universals in the name of political utility and a collectivity founded in sameness" (May 98). In her attempt to "save" intersectionality from depoliticization within feminist intersectionality studies, Sirma Bilge echoes earlier Black feminist sentiments in claiming that doing intersectionality requires "paying proper attention to historical contingencies, to specific contexts, and the purposes of specific arguments" (420). By paying attention to the specifics and consequences of urban deindustrialization, economic deregulation, and the War on Drugs, hip-hop feminism positions itself as a feminism that is attuned to the experiences of its generation.

Indeed, “Feminism” unmodified does not account for the intersectionality of Black women’s lives. hooks asserts that Black women “do not join the feminist movement because they do not see in feminist theory and practice, especially those writings made available to masses of people, potential solutions” (*Feminist Theory* 77). Hip-hop feminism attends to this gap by responding to the shifting dynamics of twenty-first century life for many young women and outlining new possibilities for solidarity and camaraderie, adding political acuity to the contemporary moment. As hooks writes,

Male supremacist ideology encourages women to believe we are valueless and obtain value only by relating to or bonding with men. We are taught that our relationships with one another diminish rather than enrich our experience. We are taught that women are ‘natural’ enemies, that solidarity will never exist between us because we cannot, should not, and do not bond with one another. We have learned these lessons well. We must unlearn them if we are to build a sustained feminist movement. We must learn to live and work in solidarity. We must learn the true meaning and value of Sisterhood. (*Feminist Theory* 43)

As hooks first advocated here in 1984, certain practices and tendencies must be unlearned in order for the work of activism to be done. She describes homophobia, judging other women on the basis of appearance, and conflict between women with different sexual practices as being expected consequences of unlearned sexist socialization (*Feminist Theory* 50). Thirty years later, this statement continues to resonate.

As Collins notes, Black feminism has historically found expression within Black community politics and it has a “dialectical and synergistic relationship with Black nationalism as a ‘Black feminist nationalism’ or ‘Black nationalist feminism’” (*From Black Power to Hip Hop* 12). It is important for Black feminism to remain in touch with the everyday realities of life for Black women to avoid the pitfalls of a “feminism safely

contained within the academy” (*From Black Power to Hip Hop* 176) that ignores the contradictions that can arise between theory and practice. As the Crunk Feminist Collective reiterates, “hip-hop feminists insist on living with contradictions, because failure to do so relegates feminism to an academic project that is not politically sustainable beyond the ivory tower” (Durham, Cooper and Morris 723). One of hip-hop feminism’s contributions is its potential to regularly encourage the critical reflexivity necessary for navigating the new questions that will emerge from the shifting realities of contemporary life.

The aesthetics of hip-hop call for an expansive sense of where knowledge production occurs. Collins welcomes the use of popular media for the expression of feminist and other personal politics as uses of public space in new and necessary ways and stresses that “representations that remain untethered to actual social movements make it difficult for popular-culture consumers to tell whether they are participating in an important new form of feminist politics or merely being entertained by it” (*From Black Power to Hip Hop* 192, 193). While *The Coldest Winter Ever* reads as a warning about what can occur if women buy into damaging reproductions of heteropatriarchy that pit women against one another, it is difficult to divorce this analysis from the endorsements of patriarchy in Souljah’s autobiographical writing.

Despite its political shortcomings and the problematic recontextualization of Souljah’s politics by her autobiography, *The Coldest Winter Ever* remains a novel that explores the ways knowledge is produced and legitimated in public spheres and popular media. The following exchange between the book’s characters Souljah and Winter

supports this reading: Souljah says, “You have to be talking about something that is important to people in their lives. You have to study, read, watch, work, and interact with people. When you master a particular field, then your words, knowledge, and insight becomes valuable,” to which Winter responds, “Inside, I’m like, *Yeah, I know what you mean. You’re saying you can do it, but I can’t. That’s bullshit.* I know more about what goes on in the street than she does. I sure know more about a lot of shit than she does” (257). Like many other insider-outsider debates – within/out the academy – the points raised on each side are valid but only one is deemed “valuable,” as Souljah points out. Souljah’s narrative explores the burden of representation, particularly for those whose voices are limited within public spheres. But Souljah does not concede to readers’ desires for happy endings; instead, Winter decides not to provide a cautionary warning to her younger sister who seems to be following a similar path and the novel ends with a bleak vision of the future that reveals what is at stake in the continued silencing/silence of Black women.

In closing, I turn to another foremother of Black feminist thought. In *Sister Outsider* Audre Lorde asks, “Why does [...] anger unleash itself most tellingly against another Black woman at the least excuse? Why do I judge her in a more critical light than any other, becoming enraged when she does not measure up?” (145) As Lorde suggests, it is “easier to deal with the external manifestations of racism and sexism than it is to deal with the results of those distortions internalized within our consciousness of ourselves and one another” (147). Through her fiction, Souljah is able to explore the complexities of Black women’s gender and sexuality politics; the self-reflexive autobiographical mode

presents a greater challenge that undermines the potential radicalness of her imaginative work. As Lorde so movingly put it, “In order to withstand the weather, we had to become stone, and now we bruise ourselves upon the other who is closest” (160). The (fictional) representation and repetition of political and social disunity suggest that the work of anti-oppression activism is not done, making the lessons of historical Black feminism necessary encouragements for women to avoid becoming another hazard to watch for in the storm of oppression and instead be shelters for one another to survive the coldest winter ever.

Souljah does not provide a solution for racial or gender oppression. As I explored, her work offers glimpses of the troubling blind spots of Black liberation rhetoric. However, the cultural work done by her writing is still important. Linda Alcoff suggests that for the oppressed, the very act of speaking (or writing) “constitutes a subject that challenges and subverts the opposition between the knowing agent and the object of knowledge, an opposition that is key in the reproduction of imperialist modes of discourse” (23). Therefore, while the content of Souljah’s writing is not always necessarily liberatory, the presence of her voice within a Black public sphere poses a significant challenge to hierarchies of power that seek to limit Black women’s roles in public discourse.

Chapter Four - There's Only One Queen B: Reading and Viewing Lil' Kim as a Challenge to Archetypical Black Womanhood

This chapter focuses on the importance of the visual and the sonic to musical and cultural criticism by examining the work of rapper Lil' Kim (Kimberly Jones) as an example of challenges to what Patricia Hill Collins describes as archetypical “controlling images” (*Black Feminist Thought* 67) of Black womanhood within the dominant public sphere. These controlling images are shaped by the politics of class, gender and race. As Collins outlines, the Jezebel (whore, or “hoochie mama”) controlling image, in particular, “makes pure White womanhood possible” (*Black Feminist Thought* 132). The complexity and contradiction within hip-hop performance make it a significant site of exploration for hip-hop feminism. With hip-hop feminism as the framework, my analysis of Lil' Kim's *Hard Core* (1996) and *Notorious K.I.M.* (2000) engages the question of how the dialogic narratives produced through both sound and vision in hip-hop performance present challenges to normative constructions of Black womanhood that are defined within racialized and class-specific boundaries. Previous chapters of this dissertation addressed the circulation of written narratives, crafted by Black women writers, within the discursive sphere of Black independent bookstores. In this chapter, I turn to another site of cultural production key to hip-hop culture—hip-hop music—to analyze music performance as a complex articulation of cultural norms that rebuts, reiterates, and demonstrates an interplay between the troublesome voice of the recording artist and restrictive archetypes of Black womanhood.

The work of Lil' Kim offers a collection of sound and imagery that documents a shift in her representation from being an archetype of male sexual fantasy to becoming a

more critically engaged participant of hip-hop culture. Lil' Kim's debut album *Hard Core* (1996) was executive produced by Sean "Diddy" Combs, founder of Bad Boy Records, and Christopher "Notorious B.I.G." Wallace aka Biggie, one of the most respected rappers in hip-hop history. Her association with Combs and Wallace gave Lil' Kim an unquestionable air of authenticity within hip-hop culture. After entering the music industry as the sole woman in the group Junior M.A.F.I.A., she quickly exceeded the fame of her group and became a rap superstar, capitalizing largely on her crafted sex appeal. The visual look of Lil' Kim is an important part of her image as, in 1990s hip-hop, the music video form increasingly placed the spotlight on the faces and bodies of the voices alongside the music. In "Sampling Sexuality: Gender, Technology and the Body in Dance Music," Barbara Bradby argues that the practice of juxtaposing the sound and body in a lip-synced music video performance actually works to "challenge the primacy of the visual in our everyday imaging of the body ... and the implication that the voice is somehow 'disembodied'" (171). Building from Bradby's assertion, I posit a reading of both visual and sonic narratives as critical to the reception of Black women rappers and their specific critiques of the music industry and public discourse more broadly. I argue that while *Hard Core* (1996) characterizes Lil' Kim as a pornographic figure, the image and lyrics curated on *Notorious K.I.M.* (2000) reveal a counter to patriarchal order and its limiting of Black women's agency in matters of sexuality and power.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Wallace's influence is absent from *Notorious K.I.M.* as he died years before its recording and release. This is an important absence to note in light of rumors and assumptions about Wallace's authorship of Lil' Kim's lyrics.

The shift in lyrical content, musical styles, and visual image between Lil' Kim's debut and sophomore albums offers a compelling narrative of self-determination in response to critiques of her performances of sexuality, language, and fashioning of the self and provide evidence of her own articulation of troublesomeness within a Black public sphere. Joan Morgan's description of Lil' Kim in *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*, a book that has helped define the hip-hop feminism that informs this project, offers a glimpse of such critiques. Morgan writes, "Kim and Foxy [Brown] are hardly examples of Afro-femme regality, refined sensuality, or womanist strength. These baby girls—with their history-making multi-platinum debuts—have the lyrical personas of hyper-sexed, couture-clad hoochie mamas" (199). Morgan reiterates a similar criticism when she suggests that Black women's power is most visible in the realm of the erotic: "Whether it's the bedroom or the boardroom, the women who rise to the top are the sisters who selectively ration their erotic power" ("The Bad Girls of Hip-Hop" 427). The implication is that Lil' Kim forfeits her (sexual) power by embodying the role of the "hyper-sexed, couture-clad hoochie mama," which positions her as powerless and unthinking in her maneuvering of the masculinized space of hip-hop. However, in the spirit of a hip-hop feminism invigorated by the critique Morgan offers, I seek to complicate readings of Lil' Kim as an exploited figure by analyzing the distinct shift in her presentation between her first and second albums as evidence of a more critical engagement with the contradictions and tensions of stardom for a Black woman performer participating in the public spheres of hip-hop and American popular culture.

Lil' Kim's music and image, while offering provocative violations of respectability politics that have helped to define her no-holds-barred hip-hop sensibility of womanhood, also reveal a reliance on white standards of beauty, sexuality, and desirability. This reliance on white beauty standards is so mundane in its circulation within American culture, I suggest, that it deeply affects critiques of Lil' Kim's particular representation of Black womanhood. The figure of Lil' Kim is spectacular because of her visible "failures" to achieve beauty according to these standards. Much of the social criticism cast at Lil' Kim focuses intensely on her physicality at the expense of critiquing the inundation of imagery propagating very limited examples of what it is to be beautiful and desirable. Consequently, Lil' Kim's pursuit of beauty ideals that are often associated with whiteness makes her an easy subject for colloquial discussions about anti-blackness and self-hating sentiment.

To address the preponderance of spectacle-focused criticism, this chapter offers a critique of the form that much of the cultural and scholarly critique of Lil' Kim has taken. Given the tendency for Lil' Kim's image to be referred to as shocking or having a "Pamela-Anderson-in-brown-skin" (Perry 181) aesthetic, I question the continued predominance of white beauty as ideal. Desirability in dominant popular culture requires the fulfillment of particular aesthetic qualities that are often at odds with the realities of diverse women's bodies. As a result of being interpolated into a world that aesthetically values white beauty ideals, Lil' Kim has been critically misread or mis-seen in ways that occlude the critique of a hierarchy that holds white beauty ideals as the standard for all women by focusing on Black women's "failures" to physically present ideal beauty and

sexuality according to such standards of respectability. The discrepancy between a fluid self-presentation and popular understandings of celebrity image reveals the ongoing discursive contestation in which artists like Lil' Kim frequently engage as they shape and continuously reshape their public images.

Instead of reiterating what has already been said about Lil' Kim's representation of sexuality, I want to think carefully about the broader waves created by her troubling of the waters of Black womanhood and the lasting impression and implications her performances have had. My analysis of the music and videos of *Hard Core* and *Notorious K.I.M.* maps her transition from what Matthew Oware calls a "man's woman," or "a woman who imitates and reinscribes a White supremacist, misogynist structure" (798), to a woman attuned to the politics of gender and sexuality within hip-hop, the music industry and American society. This "White supremacist, misogynist structure" is full of stereotypes of race and gender and often exemplifies what one Crunk feminist calls "misogynoir," or the racially-inflected misogyny directed at Black women (Bailey). In *Sister Citizen*, Melissa Harris-Perry argues that when Black women confront these stereotypes, they are "standing in a crooked room, and they have to figure out which way is up" (29).⁴⁵ By unpacking Oware's idea of a complicit "man's woman" with regard to Lil' Kim, I explore the connection between the American images of success and beauty – which tend to uphold whiteness as an ideal – and the burden of progress often placed on

⁴⁵ Harris-Perry uses the crooked room theory, based on post-WWII psychology research on field dependence, to articulate how subjectivity is shaped by our surroundings. She writes, "In one study, subjects were placed in a crooked chair in a crooked room and then asked to align themselves vertically. Some perceived themselves as straight only in relation to their surroundings. ... But not everyone did this: some managed to get themselves more or less upright regardless of how crooked the surrounding images were" (29).

Black women to upright themselves in a crooked room. Much like the presence of Teri Woods and Sister Souljah in street literature, Lil' Kim's voice troubles the male-dominated space of hip-hop, in particular, by giving a language of refusal and empowerment to the everyday female hip-hop listener—importantly, a language well outside of an academic feminist one. The development of her critical lens, evident in her music, marks her attempt to right herself in the crooked room of American culture.

Viewing Lil' Kim as an anti-icon

The circulation of visual and auditory significations reveals the processes by which we make sense of the world we live in through language, sound, and vision simultaneously. Accordingly, my analysis aligns the musical texts of Lil' Kim with her visual representation to analyze the discursive interplay between her musical image and stereotypes of Black womanhood. Using theories of visibility, I question the ease with which early twentieth-century archetypes of Black womanhood like the Jezebel once again slip into our contemporary understandings of Black women's representations of sexuality. Lil' Kim's representation maps the attempted amalgamation of different cultures, practices, and aesthetics within the American context. Her image doubly troubles understandings of Black womanhood by reiterating and responding to its tensions produced through the intersection of gender, blackness, and sexuality within a system that aesthetically privileges whiteness or its likeness. For these reasons, I suggest a reading of her image as an anti-icon of Black womanhood. Instead of an iconicity that exemplifies all that is easily read as respectable, I suggest that the anti-icon works to demonstrate the inability to articulate or enact ideals that work against her lived

embodiment and thus trouble understandings of standards of beauty through an enactment of failure.



Figure 4: The artwork for *Hard Core* depicts Lil' Kim as a sex symbol with expensive taste. Photo credit: Michael Levine



Figure 5: Lil' Kim's look for her second album presents a very different version of her than that seen on *Hard Core*. Photo credit: David LaChapelle

Lil' Kim's "hard core" approach to visual representation embodies the trouble with reconciling the conflicted ideals of publicity for Black women hip-hop performers. The artwork for her debut album *Hard Core* (1996) positions her as a sexualized figure, surrounded by conspicuous signs of wealth such as roses, a polar bear skin rug, sparkling jewelry, and champagne. Like many of her hip-hop contemporaries, Lil' Kim deploys the markers of wealth and glamour in attempt to empower the historically disempowered in

ways that a capitalist society understands.⁴⁶ For her second album *Notorious K.I.M.* (2000), released after the death of Wallace aka Notorious B.I.G., her mentor and occasional lover, her revamped image included long blonde hair, colored eye contacts, and breast implants. These visual cues reveal how her naming of white icons of wealth and beauty had gone beyond aspirational lyrics to become her physical reality. As she aesthetically moved closer to whiteness, Lil' Kim acquired more commercial success, securing contracts with various clothing and beauty brands.⁴⁷

It has been argued that Lil' Kim modelled her image after icons of whiteness.⁴⁸ In her study of performance, visibility, and blackness, Nicole R. Fleetwood reads Lil' Kim's transformation as "signaling the unnaturalness of white beauty" and "a performance that destabilizes the being of excess flesh and corporeal attachment to one that turns race and gender into plasticity, highly manufactured and purchasable goods" (144). In a phrase, Fleetwood surmises that Lil' Kim became a "familiar spectacle who is no longer spectacular" (144). I understand the spectacle produced during the *Notorious K.I.M.*-era to be symptomatic of a desire to be read as sexual *and* beautiful without being rendered excess flesh. If, as controlling images like the Jezebel dictate, Black women's sexuality is already excessive, Lil' Kim's proximity to the markers of white, and sometimes

⁴⁶ Such displays of wealth are not unique to Lil' Kim. See Chapter One for more on the hip-hop mogul, conspicuous consumption, and hip-hop culture's engagement with the ethos of the American Dream as a way of "buying into" the American polity.

⁴⁷ In *Race, Gender, and the Politics of Skin Tone*, Margaret L. Hunter suggests that "people make rational decisions to Anglicize their features in order to maximize their economic gain" and that many men and women of color may choose cosmetic procedures to "make their features less African or Indian or Asian, and more European, or Western, though these decisions are rarely articulated in this racial manner" (67). While it is not part of my task to make assumptions about Lil' Kim's interior thoughts, I do find it worthwhile to note a correlation of success with her changing image.

⁴⁸ See Perry (2004); LaMay and Armstrong (2006).

pornographic, female sexuality can be read as an attempt to declare sexuality that is not a spectacle but, instead, provocative yet familiar. The critical concern is not simply that Lil' Kim aspires to whiteness but that the archetypes of Black women as sexual beings in public discourse are so limiting that white icons and the "hypersexual" Black woman persist as the few viable models of sexuality. Though Fleetwood's *Troubling Vision* deals specifically with visual representations in high art and popular culture, her ideas run along similar lines to my previous critical engagement with the "troublesome"—those voices or visions that challenge simplistic understandings of Black women's contributions to culture and public discourse. In her study, Fleetwood takes on iconicity, or "the ways in which singular images or signs come to represent a whole host of historical occurrences and processes" (2). Fleetwood argues that Black cultural productions bear a particular weight to do the work of altering a history of racial inequality. As she puts it, the desire is to "have the cultural product solve the very problem that it represents: that seeing black is always a problem in a visual field that structures the troubling presence of blackness" (3). I argue that this weight to which Fleetwood draws attention has become (or always has been) an unbearable one for Black women cultural producers. Its weight is stifling; one cannot be an imperfect being while carrying this burden because the call to be progressively productive, to uphold the politics of respectability, effectively limits subjectivity.

To relieve this burden of representation, I suggest a reading that treats Lil' Kim as a conventional popular figure who models ways of being in the world that can extend beyond her particular embodiment. I find Fleetwood's theory of *non-iconicity* particularly

useful to this end. Non-iconicity is an “aesthetic and theoretical position that lessens the weight placed on the black visual to do so much” (9). As Tina Campt importantly notes, images signify across visual, sonic, and haptic registers (18). These modalities contribute to the social life of images, which, in Black expressive culture perform important work “in creating a sense of self, community, and belonging for their subjects” (Campt 14). Campt is focused on Black family photograph in her analysis; however, I argue that the same can be said for popular images that play on common or archetypical imagery of Black womanhood. Resisting “singularity and completeness in narrative” (Fleetwood 64) becomes a way of responding to the overdetermination faced by Black women rappers in their negotiations of gender and sexuality. Lil’ Kim’s shifts in music and visuals avoid completeness in her narrative image. As my analysis of the video for “How Many Licks?” explores, this fragmentation is in itself critical of a singular narrative. These creative choices demonstrate the dialogic nature of hip-hop music as artists are always in conversation and contestation with their own representations.

The visual for “How Many Licks?” offers a stunning enactment of the commodification and physical alteration Lil’ Kim undergoes in her quest for celebrity success as well as the absurdity of mass consumption. The opening scene features an assembly line manufacturing “Lil’ Kim Edible Dolls” for sale in three flavors: Candy Kim, Pin-Up Kim, and Nightrider Kim. Each “flavour” comes with a different hair colour (candy is blonde, pin-up is brown, and nightrider is black). The dolls, made to fulfill popular demand, are advertised as being “realistic” and “anatomically correct”—deeply ironic labels in light of her cosmetic surgeries and self-adopted moniker of the “Black

Barbie.” By calling on the iconography of Barbie, Lil’ Kim conjures a familiar figure of American culture but with alteration; through cosmetic surgery, her progression towards whiteness and regression from blackness draws into sharp relief the inextricable linkage between Black womanhood and white womanhood elucidated by Lil’ Kim’s visual presentation. As Fleetwood argues, “The black woman as excess establishes the boundaries for normative codes of the white female body and femininity” (111). Are such ideals of beauty and femininity, often based in falsity, meant to appear as “natural”? Lil’ Kim’s representation of Black womanhood steeped in white beauty calls attention to the demands of such beauty ideals when they are purported to be the model of desirability and attractiveness. The visual narrative of “How Many Licks?” offers a satirical criticism of the consumptive practices of American culture that often disembody public Black women into an assembly of parts to be consumed. The label “made in America” implies that, in American popular culture, Black women performers are producible on demand and readily purchasable for consumers’ material and sexual pleasure.

Lil’ Kim’s performance of hyper-visible sexuality is emblematic of one narrative that drives Black women’s publicity: that to be sexual is to be always and already hypersexual. There is no happy medium. But how did we get here? How are Black women defined beyond or in spite of their own self-definition? As Fleetwood argues, blackness is a thing that circulates:

It is not rooted in a history, person, or thing, although it has many histories and many associations with people and things. Blackness fills in space between matter, between object and subject, between bodies, between looking and being looked upon. It fills in the void and is the void. Through

its circulation, blackness attaches to bodies and narratives coded as such but it always exceeds these attachments. (6)

If blackness is a thing that circulates, a thing that is recognizable as narrative-laden, then aspects of the attached narratives must also be understood as particularly gendered. When it comes to Black women, narratives of blackness tend towards respectability. Politics of respectability, which were developed as a strategic response to dehumanizing stereotypes and controlling images for Black women, have transcended their moment in time to become something that continues to alter how Black womanhood is envisioned within dominant discourse. By returning to the origins of the narrative of Black women as hypersexual, I intend to explore the discomfort produced by the representation of Lil' Kim and to highlight the potential of Black women cultural producers to trouble current understandings of Black womanhood.

As a performer, Lil' Kim has drawn the ire of critics, feminists and others, who characterize her output as vulgar and hypersexual. In *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender, and the "Vulgar" Body of Jamaican Popular Culture*, Carolyn Cooper boldly takes on the connotation of "vulgar" within Western culture:

In all domains, the 'vulgar' is that which can be traced to "Africa"; the 'refined' is that which can be traced to "Europe". (The quotation marks are intended to foreground the constructed nature of this ideology of essential cultural difference). In the domain of language and verbal creativity, English is 'refined' and Jamaican is 'vulgar'; oral texts are 'vulgar'; written texts are 'refined.' (8)

Through her use of explicit sexual language and the display of skin, Lil' Kim defies the criteria of refinement and places herself firmly on the 'vulgar' side of cultural

production.⁴⁹ The essentialized cultural differences in various domains noted by Cooper and the linkage between exposed skin and sexuality in American culture bolsters readings of Lil' Kim as vulgar and hypersexual. Though Lil' Kim's visual representation seems to reiterate these stereotypes, there is a sense that vulgarity and hypersexuality are assumed conditions that Black people must work *against*. As Dorothy Roberts notes, "Racist thinking dictates that Black bodies, intellect, character, and culture are all inherently vulgar" (8-9).

What does Lil' Kim's re-presentation of such tropes of Black womanhood signal in this moment? What histories are summoned by her imaging? Fleetwood's characterization of Lil' Kim as a Black female artist who "deploy[s] hypervisibility as constitutive of black femaleness in dominant visual culture" (9) makes important strides toward the kind of hip-hop feminist analysis that allows for less polarizing criticism, or, in the words of Morgan, "fucks with the grays" (*When Chickenheads* 59)—the murky areas of gender politics as they arise in everyday life. Carol E. Henderson offers a broad assessment of the anti-Lil' Kim debate when she writes,

Most black women wince when assessing how their daughters and granddaughters have used the modest social, legal, and political gains of the first and second wave of the feminist and womanist movements to reveal to the world the intimate chambers of black femininity and womanhood—chambers that were rifled and pillaged—disfigured and marred by a world that has imagined the black woman as overexposed, abject, grotesque—in short, a fleshly aberration on the edge of humanity. (49)

⁴⁹Though Wallace, a first-generation Jamaican-American encouraged an American-styled pornographic image for Lil' Kim, the influence of Jamaican dancehall culture could have factored into Wallace's expectations of what should be included in performance.

Though Henderson's language is cloaked in generational notions of respectability, her view is not hers alone.⁵⁰ Lil' Kim is often read as the daughter who has broken all codes of silence and propriety for Black womanhood. In a 1997 interview with Lil' Kim following the release of *Hard Core*, bell hooks questions her about her feelings about this characterization, noting that "dangerous [...] forces of repressive puritanical morality" seek to silence Lil' Kim (hooks, "Platinum Pussy" 68). When hooks explains that women of her foremothers' generations believed in the exchange of something, usually marriage, for "the pussy," Lil' Kim responds by saying, "Sometimes it's not just exchanging; sometimes it's just having a sexual orgasm 'cause you love it and you need it" (qtd. in hooks, "Platinum Pussy" 68). The reference to a historical example of transactional sexuality offered by hooks connects Black women's past to the contemporary and highlights how gender and sexuality expectations were negotiated in previous generations. Lil' Kim's hyper-visible representation counters discourse of sexuality that views Black women as objects whose bodies are *acted upon* and instead centers pleasure as essential to Black women's sexuality.

Reading Hard Core

Lil' Kim's solo debut structures her representation as the fulfillment of male heterosexual fantasy. From the outset, *Hard Core* is sonically marked as a pornographic text and an atypical representation of Black female sexuality. The opening track "Intro in A-minor" recalls an older New York City where pornographic theatres existed and

⁵⁰ As Chapter Two explores, young black women are willing and capable arbiters of appropriateness in their own lives.

introduces listeners to the sexualized image of Lil' Kim. After exiting a taxi, a man buys himself a ticket to the "Lil' Kim: Hard Core" show and purchases a small popcorn with a large amount of butter. Soon, the sounds of the man masturbating in a theatre fill the soundscape as he calls out, "Kim, Kim." Lil' Kim's voice is not immediately present; instead, her presence is defined through the unnamed man's gaze. By framing listeners' introduction to her through her command of the male gaze, Lil' Kim defines herself as a figure whose power is derived through her sexualized performance. As the man nears the point of climax, the intro blends into "Big Momma Thang." Lil' Kim, joined by fellow Brooklyn rapper Jay-Z, demonstrates her husky Brooklyn flow and marks her own audacity and her culturally respected hip-hop affiliation by adlibbing "You got it goin' on, wha wha" as the song begins. Her first lyrics declare, "I used to be scared of the dick/now I throw lips to the shit/handle it like a real bitch/Heather Hunter, Janet Jacme, take it in the butt/ Yes, yes what" ("Big Momma Thang"). Her nonchalant flow and vocal quality, along with the structure and delivery of the lines, appropriates a power and comfortableness commonly associated with masculine displays of sexual conquests or exploits in hip-hop. By naming Black porn stars, Lil' Kim seeks to substantiate her own sexual prowess while also framing sex as a profession and a source of pleasure not bound to a romantic relationship.

The seamlessness with which the voyeuristic theatre encounter of "Intro in A-minor" transitions into bravado-filled boasting of prowess on "Big Momma Thang" suggests that the fulfillment of fantasy is possible. Not only is Lil' Kim seen as sexually skillful, she is a willing participant in the imagined encounters and, unlike other

heterosexual women, she does not want long-term commitment from her male partners.

The first verse ends,

Tell me what's on your mind when the tongue's in the pussy
Is it marriage? (Damn, this bitch is bad)
Baby carriage? (Damn, I love that ass)
Shit no, on a dime, shit is mine
Gotta keep 'em comin' all the time ("Big Momma Thang")

Lil' Kim clearly unbinds sex from marriage to revel in both its pleasure and power. Yet, this challenge to one structure of heteropatriarchy poses a potentially contradictory outcome for hip-hop feminism: from a sex-positive perspective, she advocates for the enjoyment of sex for its own sake (boldly implying that material gain can make it more enjoyable). At the same time, her interest in sex alone can work in the interest of an imagination that finds the lack of exchange excitingly exploitive. Despite the desire to view the pursuit of pleasure as empowering, the cultural currency of the sexually free and empowered woman is limited in a culture that expects sexuality to be transactional, a concept articulated by Beauty Bragg and David Ikard, and discussed in Chapter One, to describe the importance of exchange of money or power in intimate relationships (239). As the narrator of Teri Woods's *True to the Game* expresses, "The only way not to give the sisters their props was if they weren't getting paper" (7). Within hip-hop's public sphere, the sexually free woman who is content with pleasure being the primary interest runs the risk of losing the respect of her female counterparts for undermining the transactional understanding that frames many heterosexual relationships.

On "No Time," Lil' Kim reinvigorates the narrative of materially transactional sexuality as she raps about gaining material markers of wealth and idolizing icons of

white beauty such as Zsa Zsa Gabor, Demi Moore, and Princess Diana. The video for the single bolsters the narrative of wealth as it is replete with images of furs, diamonds, expensive cars, jewelry, and mounds of cash. The video is set in what appears to be an empty indoor shopping plaza and escalators figure prominently. The video enacts the desire for class ascendancy as Lil' Kim and Puff Daddy dance and strut up and down the escalators while various men try to impress women with jewellery and cash, following Lil' Kim's declaration that "Nothing make a woman feel better than Berrettas and Amaretto, butter leathers and mad cheddar [...] No money money, no licky licky" ("No Time"). The song samples from Vicki Anderson's "Message from the Soul Sisters," an anthem of female independence that encourages women to be wary of falling for the "okeydoke" or succumbing to the swagger of a man who does not give them what they want. In the video for "No Time," a male suitor attempts to win the attention of a woman by showering her with diamonds. Instead of her attention, he is rewarded with a dismissive palm-to-face hand gesture that makes her disinterest clear and stops his pursuit. Sometimes not even flashy jewels can win a woman's affection.

The one-dimensional representation of materialistic women as objects of sexual conquest and displays of conspicuous consumption fits the overall feel of *Hard Core*, which I argue is influenced by the (Black) masculinist perspectives of Lil' Kim's executive producers Wallace and Combs. Both the structure of the album and the lyrics rapped by Lil' Kim help shape this portrayal. Several songs, including "No Time," offer representations of transactional sexuality. The interlude "Take it!" features Lil' Cease, Biggie, and another man talking about who they are going to "fuck." Women as subjects

with desires play no part in their discussion. The interlude leads into the song “Crush on You,” from which Lil’ Kim is noticeably absent.⁵¹ While the story behind her absence is unknown, the listening effect amounts to an exclusion of women’s voices from a masculine space. The interlude “Schemin,” which comes two tracks after “Take it!,” offers a foil to the “Take it” interlude as the women consider the men and size them up by their conspicuous signs of wealth or make fun of those pretending to have wealth: as one woman suggests, “that chain probably Big chain...you know Biggie got the fuckin dollars” (“Take It!”). Read as an ensemble, “Take it!,” “Crush on You,” and “Schemin” offer a glimpse of men’s and women’s discourse about gender, sexuality, and power. Whereas the men seem to define power through their sexual prowess, the women focus on material signs of wealth. The women’s interlude exemplifies the album’s representation of transactional sexuality as they characterize themselves gold-diggers out for the men because of their wealth.

The song “Queen Bitch” is exceptional in its distinction from the emphasis on sexual prowess to offer a Lil’ Kim voice full of gangster-girl bravado, making the percussiveness of hip-hop feminism audible. Though gangster rap was nothing new by 1996, Lil’ Kim’s embodiment of a gangster mentality was strikingly different from that of acts like NWA, Snoop Dogg, or even early Jay-Z as a hard core woman rapper with (hetero)sex appeal was decidedly outside of existing models for Black women performers, exemplifying the fluid nature of women’s participation within masculine

⁵¹ It is unclear why Lil’ Kim is not rapping on the album version of the song. The voice saying “true” during the chorus, which seems like a repeated clip, sounds as though it could be her but she is not credited as appearing on the song. However, the version of “Crush on You” that was released as a single does feature her rapping.

spaces. Her husky vocal quality and identifiable Brooklyn flow place her among other rappers in the masculinized territory of gangsta or hard core rap, despite her expressed affinity towards white beauty icons. The song begins in standard 4/4 time with Lil' Kim rapping for 16 bars to the looped sound of bass and piano. As she flows and momentum builds, the sound of trumpets and a scratched sample of her voice add to the track's free-flowing feel. The bass line, sampled from one bar of a piano riff from Roberta Flack's "Hey That's No Way to Say Goodbye," provides a hypnotizing rhythm over which Lil' Kim showcases her lyrical dexterity, varied rhyme schemes, and mastery of syncopated flow. This is one of the few times that Lil' Kim's voice is the sole feature, with the exception of Biggie chiming in for a bar to boast about his own success and encourage her to "kick it bitch" as a co-sign of her talent that is inflected with elements of the pimp-and-ho narrative often deployed in hip-hop of the era. "Queen Bitch," which is shortened to "Queen B" to operate as a nickname for Lil' Kim, signifies as a title of empowerment as she uses it to highlight her supremacy over any competitors, man or woman, within a male-dominated genre.

The language of royalty, though oppressive in its hierarchal constitution, is meant to signal a distinction through which listeners can interpretively imagine and empower themselves alongside acknowledgement of Lil' Kim as an exceptional female performer. Lil' Kim's use of the Queen B moniker is taken up by L.H. Stallings as representative of a "separate category of gender that does not have to adhere to the logics of intelligible gender" (269). Indeed, *Hard Core* revels in the outrageous and the attempts of women to balance the power scales through the operation of transactional sexuality. Lil' Kim

performs both sexual provocateur and hardened gangster girl; by performing songs that are unequivocally descriptive with regard to sexual desire, she breaks a silence surrounding Black women's sexuality. At the same time, the lyrics on *Hard Core* often adhere to the standard of women's self-expression that "dovetails with male sexual fantasy" (Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars* 235). While Lil' Kim offers a provocative representation of sexuality, she is still subjected to a (white) heteropatriarchal order where desirability is sought and claimable only through particular channels of beauty. Stallings suggests reading Lil' Kim as "a performative satire on the conflation of white feminine beauty and the twentieth-century cult of heteronormative Black womanhood that still persists and polices today's Black women" (256). Building on Stallings theorization, I argue that Lil' Kim's performance of white feminine beauty demonstrates more than just the policing of Black womanhood by heteronormativity: it signals the absurdity and even dangers of beauty ideals, based in falsity, that malign blackness. Consequently, I suggest, only an intersectional analysis of Lil' Kim can elucidate the logic behind her expressions of Black womanhood in the crooked room of American popular culture.

Lil' Kim's shift in lyrical content and image signal a change in her gender and sexual politics that articulates a sense of the limitations of respectability. Rose states that for explicit female rappers such as Lil' Kim, "their sexual freedom could be considered dangerously close to self-inflicted exploitation" (*Black Noise* 168). Alternatively, Stallings argues that "verbosity about sexuality acts as a form of militancy necessary for

the survival of the Queen B(?)” (264).⁵² Both Rose and Stallings offer persuasive points of view that address the double-edged nature of (re)presenting sexuality in the dominant public sphere. The investment in correcting the perceived damage done by (and sometimes to) Lil’ Kim, according to those who view her as an icon of deviant Black female sexuality, has surpassed questioning how Black female sexuality can exist without being overdetermined as “excessive.” As Gwendolyn Pough states, “Lil’ Kim’s acknowledgment that they [women] are sexual beings who enjoy sex, and lots of it, is hard to face when one is taught to be ashamed of such desire” (188). Respectability politics instill this kind of shame and thus relegate discussions of Black women’s sexuality to an uncritiqued void. By centering her own experience on *Notorious K.I.M.*, Lil’ Kim finds a voice to address the politics of gender and respectability at work in hip-hop culture.

Reading Notorious K.I.M.

The *Notorious K.I.M.* (2000) finds Lil’ Kim trying out new modes of being that demonstrate a rudimentary critique of hip-hop gender politics. The album’s introductory track “Lil’ Drummer Boy” begins with the ominous sounds of a storm brewing. Lil’ Kim is on trial for being a “threat to society” and showing a “blatant disregard for the law.” The (white) prosecutorial voice, representative of patriarchy, seeks to punish Lil’ Kim for transgressing the rules of gender and race by appropriating masculine power through language and action. While referring to herself as “the first female king,” she argues her

⁵² Stallings sees “Queen Bitch” (alternatively “Queen Bee” or “Queen B(?)” to signal the interchangeability) as “a separate category of gender that does not have to adhere to the logics of intelligible gender” (269).

case by claiming, “They mad ‘cause I’m a girl” (“Lil’ Drummer Boy”). Lil’ Kim declares that her actions have been in self-defence as the men who killed her best friend were “all dressed in blue and they want her dead too” (“Lil’ Drummer Boy”).⁵³ This opening track creates a greater feeling of openness and vulnerability than that of *Hard Core*. For the moment, the bawdy persona is absent here. Instead, Lil’ Kim admits to experiencing emotional turmoil:

Lord I cry, I cry
From the things that I’ve seen
That I’ve seen
And Lord I cry, I cry
From the things I’ve seen, ooh
If you only knew
The things I’ve been through
(Oh yeah) You’d know why
You’d know why
I cry, I cry, I cry (“Lil’ Drummer Boy”)

As Lil’ Kim sings this verse, the weakness and cracking in her singing voice adds to the sense of vulnerability expressed through the lyrics. As Bradby posits, emotionality in rap songs is often expressed through the female singing voice in contrast to rapping, which is equated with rationality because of its reliance on spoken language (167). By arguing her case through the “rational” form of rapping that allows her to “occupy male [space] linguistically” (Perry 157), alongside her feminine (read: emotional) singing, Lil’ Kim further defies categorization by distorting the distinction between feminine emotionality and masculine rationality. In her conversation with hooks, Lil’ Kim expressed a desire to

⁵³ She is likely referring to her friend, lover, and mentor Wallace whose murder remains unsolved. Rumours have suggested involvement from the street gang the Crips, known for their color of blue. However, the blue could also refer to the original “boys in blue”: the police.

go deeper in her music, in part to avoid so much negativity from older women who are “not being as real as [her]” (qtd. in hooks, “Platinum Pussy” 70). Lil’ Kim’s voice on *Notorious K.I.M.* sounds more mature than it does on *Hard Core* and the lyrics suggest a greater awareness of her relevance to culture. This sets the tone for the album, which presents more varied elements of her personality that more fully represent the spectrum of her life experience.

In addition to greater representation of other life experiences, Lil’ Kim maintains a hold on her reputation as an openly sexual being with one variation: there is an awareness of the discursive implications of her stance and an attempt to intervene in the troubling readings of her image. On the song “Suck My Dick” she asks listeners, “Imagine if I was a dude/hitting cats from the back/with no strings attached [...] picture that/I treat y’all niggas like y’all treat us” (“Suck My Dick”). In an effort to contest the submission demanded by sexism, Lil’ Kim usurps the masculine role, presumably while on a city street, when a man catcalls her with “come here bitch.” She responds by telling him if she were a man, she would “tell y’all to suck my dick.” Her explicit retort is a militant inversion of linguistic power—a survival tactic that protects her from the susceptibility assumed of the female position within masculinized spaces. Imani Perry describes Lil’ Kim as a *badwoman*, a hip-hop configuration of the folkloric character of the badman, who is visually feminine but appropriates male spaces through language (164).⁵⁴ While *Hard Core* featured interludes where men discussed their potential sexual

⁵⁴ Perry describes the badman figure as a “rebel to society, living on the margins of a black community that at once regards him as a hero and a threat” (128).

conquests, *Notorious K.I.M.* features an interlude at the end of “Don’t Mess with Me” of men talking about Lil’ Kim’s sexual reputation, as gleaned through her music. The group convinces one of the men to proposition her and Lil’ Kim shoots him (in the buttocks) for daring to make such an advance. Resistance to such sexualisation can be understood within a larger context of Black women’s sexuality. As Pough suggests, “The fear of being labeled sexually promiscuous or always sexually available plagues many Black women. It is a legacy passed down from generation to generation” (188). Lil’ Kim’s violent response to the assumption that she is sexually open to any suitor is in line with her efforts to move beyond being read solely as a sex object, putting the fantastical pornographic vision to rest. While Lil’ Kim’s performance still seeks to incite desire, she is no longer willing to submit to the whims of male sexual fantasy—she wants to control it. In order to control the narrative, one must be the author of her own script. Lil’ Kim’s insistence on her own pleasure is expressed in the song and video for “How Many Licks?” where she instructs her admirers, “Close your eyes, then imagine your tongue in between my thighs.” When she stops to pick up a male passenger for a date in the video the caption reads: “She Doesn’t Satisfy You... You Satisfy Her!” Pleasure for her admirers can only come as a result of them satisfying her. When she declares, “If I talk freaky, then that’s my business/If I dress freaky, then that’s my business” (“Single Black Female”), Lil’ Kim demonstrates how her rebellious streak has developed into an articulated politics of pleasure.

There are, however, limits to the emancipatory effects of seeking one’s own pleasure. Lil’ Kim declares, “I got it all” (“Custom Made”) but what is at risk in defining

freedom through the acquisition of tangible goods? The centering of female pleasure is sonically pronounced on “Custom Made (Give It to You)” as the song opens with a sampled clip of a woman’s sensual moans on loop. The moans continue throughout each chorus as Lil’ Kim declares, “Goodness gracious, the papers/where the cash at, where the stash at/nigga pass that [...] see, we love the cash” (“Custom Made”). She gives a shout out to women in the strip club and commends them by rapping, “I ain’t mad, do ya thing mami get that cash.” Money is implicitly linked to pleasure; the overlapping of the woman’s moans with Lil’ Kim’s lyrics of materialism embodies the gratification that transactional sexuality can bring. This also demonstrates the potential entrapment women in the sphere of hip-hop may face: when trying to free oneself from the oppressiveness of heteropatriarchy, women may become more deeply invested in exploitive consumer capitalist structures that provide an illusion of having it all.

There’s Only One

As an entertainer, Lil’ Kim made choices, however painful, to increase her market potential and, like Teri Woods and Sister Souljah, the content of her productions is dialogically engaged with the realities it may represent and the possibilities it models. When asked in an interview about her physical changes, Lil’ Kim said the breast augmentation was “the most pain [she] ever felt in [her] life” (qtd. in Sharpley-Whiting 33). She says of the breast implants,

That was something I wanted to do because I knew I was going to be doing a lot of modeling and it made me feel sexy. It was something I always wanted to do, and I did it. I don’t know if it was the right thing or the wrong thing, but I did it. (“Is the Mainstream Ready for Lil’ Kim?”)

As the years progressed, Lil' Kim moved even more towards whiteness in appearance as her skin appeared lighter in photographs and in person to match her often-blonde hair. Thomasin LaMay and Robin Armstrong argue that Lil' Kim "very self-consciously recreated herself as a siren, specifically her own version of the white siren" (335). While Stallings suggests we read Lil' Kim as a "performative satire on the conflation of white feminine beauty and the twentieth-century cult of heteronormative Black womanhood" (256), I extend this critique further to add that this conflation is not only about beauty but also about sexuality. In order to be recognized as sexual and avoid being labelled a "Ho" (which LaMay and Armstrong ignorantly conflate with "African American [women] in rap culture" [335]) Lil' Kim strategically reached towards signifiers of whiteness, calling attention to the restrictive boundaries of Black womanhood. She says of Wallace, her mentor and lover, "He was fascinated with light-skinned women. He always wanted that. And when he became 'Big Poppa', he was able to get all of that" ("Is the Mainstream Ready for Lil' Kim?"). As this anecdote shows, the pursuit of whiteness is not limited to performers or women like Lil' Kim who alter themselves to appear closer to such an image; it also extends, perhaps unwittingly, into men's desires for women who appear to possess the ideals of white beauty.

Lil' Kim is a single performer who has taken a large amount of criticism for her representation of Black womanhood in mainstream culture, becoming an unfortunate icon for such critiques. Steven Shaviro suggests that Lil' Kim's inhabitation of the stereotype of the hypersexual Black woman pushes the stereotype to such a limit that she "virtually reduces herself to the status of a cartoon" (175). I question why Lil' Kim, read seemingly

out of the context of the crooked room of American culture, becomes the primary focus of critique at the expense of interrogating the unlivable standards of Black womanhood that overdetermine her. Shaviro characterizes the video for “How Many Licks?” as a work of “science fiction, in form and content” (169) and posits that Lil’ Kim and fellow rapper and friend Missy Elliott tell “stories of black female empowerment, in the face of deeply engrained racism and sexism” (179). The musical collaborations and friendship between Lil’ Kim and Missy signify an important moment in 1990s hip-hop where, instead of rivalry, two Black women rappers refused to adhere to the logic of capitalist heteropatriarchy that requires constant competition between them. Their work together demonstrates the possibilities of collaborative cultural production and the development of a supportive community for women, particularly within male-dominated spaces. Consequently, while Shaviro refers to Lil’ Kim as a postmodern cyborg who fully embraces science fiction-like transformations, I see her as a representation of the intersectional nature of Black women’s experience within the discursive sphere of entertainment. Lil’ Kim’s work is not just the stuff of science fiction. It is deeply informed by its historical and contemporaneous realities, and her post-*Hard Core* output reveals an awareness of how she has been misread or mis-seen through the singular narrative of hypersexuality. The collection of sounds, imagery, and lyrics on *Notorious K.I.M* resembles the disorienting sensation of being in contestation with one’s own representation.

In her music, Lil’ Kim often declares that there is only one Lil’ Kim— only one “Queen B,” a sentiment echoed by Missy Elliott on her song “I’m Talking.” Yet, as this

chapter has shown, her dynamic practices of self-representation model various ways of being in the social world. Her performance of desires—sexual, social, and economic—demonstrates the hip-hop generation’s desires of class ascendancy, material gain, and sexual freedom and empowerment for Black women. This burden is not an easy one to bear in a world where representative models of Black womanhood are often limited to images of respectability that can only offer truncated versions of the subjectivity they seek to both empower and protect. Lil’ Kim provides what Whitney Peoples describes as “enough of a cleavage in dominant African-American community discourses to begin a simultaneous critique and exploration of the sexual scripts that have been provided” by institutions and individuals external to young women (25). Lil’ Kim provides both a language of refusal and malleable image of beauty for “all [her] ghetto bitches in the projects” (“Suck My Dick”), and arguably paved the way for one of today’s biggest hip-hop and pop stars, Nicki Minaj.⁵⁵ In a fitting reflection back to the original motivation for this dissertation, Lil’ Kim rounds out this collection of popular troublesome voices by demonstrating the power of such voices to provoke and unsettle sedimented ways of thinking about subjectivity by at times reifying and challenging the problematics of representing Black womanhood in dominant and alternate public spheres.

⁵⁵ Nicki Minaj has publicly credited Lil’ Kim as one of her major musical influences. The number of currently active women rappers with mainstream or “crossover” success is very low and Minaj is arguably the single most successful woman rapper in contemporary popular culture.

Conclusion: Power, Complexity, and Risk within the Troublesome Voice

Can I live
Free from the burdens society
wants to give

Mirror, mirror
on the world wall
Telling one story
all day long

Black girl, brown face
Hair kinky
Not straight laced

Movies and TV
What do I see?
Idolized images
But none of me

--Noreen Mallory, "Can I Live" (*One Way Urban Theory* 34)

During my time at the Black and Nobel bookstore, I met Noreen Mallory, a Black woman writer. She was raised in Philadelphia and though she said she rarely reads fiction, she was excited to spend some time speaking with me about herself and my project. I spoke with her about her career as a writer, which ranged from the fields of journalism to poetry. During our conversation, she mentioned her poem "Can I live" as being particularly powerful to Black women. The poem speaks to the burden of representation, the troubling dominance of a singular narrative, and the feeling of alienation Black women can experience when looking for themselves in the dominant public sphere. This poem, published in 2007, remains relevant today.

For all the work toward generating representations that expand the significations of Black womanhood, there is still work to be done. This project argues for a reading of hip-hop culture, its objects and sites, as constitutive of a Black public sphere with hip-hop aesthetics; I also highlight hip-hop feminism as a useful theoretical framework for analyzing hip-hop texts. The interpretive practices of both critics and readers/listeners/participants of this Black public sphere matter: from where and with what framework one views cultural production informs how meaning is constructed from texts. The interviews offered as context here work to validate the knowledge and discourse of street literature readers to counter what I view as an omission in critiques about how such texts signify and the tense relation of street literature to the larger body of African American literature. The texts explored in this dissertation are ones that work to highlight Black women's contributions to the public sphere of hip-hop, offering perspectives that differ from the predominantly masculine representations of public and popular culture. However, the complexities of representation pose significant challenges to analyzing texts like the ones explored here. By considering troublesomeness as a concept, my analysis seeks to explore the intersectional complexity of the work of Woods, Sister Souljah, and Lil' Kim without flattening out their differences or evading their contradictions and risks.

As I explored in my introduction, the troublesome voices of Black womanhood confront stereotypes about Black women's subjectivity, call respectability politics into question, and command visibility in public spheres that would regularly ignore them. What I have endeavoured to do here is to provide the kind of criticism of Black women's

cultural production that acknowledges the power of Black public spheres and their different ways of knowing and producing knowledge. I have also shown that feminist principles are embedded in the lives of young Black women in unanticipated ways. I have explored my own positioning as both a participant in hip-hop culture and researcher, with attention to the implications this privileged position can have on my work and how it is perceived. Though the dangers of doing ethnographic work from positions of privilege exists, I agree with Joan Sangster's assertion that "[l]ocating experience, however difficult that project [...] should remain one of our utopian goals" (23). Linda Alcoff explains why retreat from the difficulties of doing such political work is not a possibility:

[...] we cannot neatly separate off our mediating praxis that interprets and constructs our experiences from the praxis of others. We are collectively caught in an intricate, delicate web in which others find themselves moving also. When I speak for myself, I am constructing a possible self, a way to be in the world, and am offering that to others, whether I intend to or not, as one possible way to be. (21)

Although trouble may await projects like this one, figuring out the "best way to be in it" (J. Butler, *Gender Trouble* xxvii) remains an important task.

By positioning street literature as a part of hip-hop culture, I demonstrate the intertextuality between written and musical forms and the discursive practices of hip-hop. In Chapter One, I outlined a brief history of street literature with particular attention to matters of gender. I discussed the importance of urban locations for the production and circulation of street literature and offered an analysis of Teri Woods's *True to the Game* as a prototypical hip-hop romance. I argue that texts like *True to the Game*—written and largely read by young Black women—speak to matters of class, sexuality, and

respectability in a language that is at once critical and indicative of the problematics of representation of complex issues and contradictory stances. As I explored in Chapter Two, the discursive spaces of hip-hop, which include Black bookstores, are lively, proactive spaces. Those who participate in such spaces are not merely responding to the slights and exclusions of dominant discourse; they are dynamically engaged in building their own worlds and making their own meanings.

In Chapter Three, I argue that though a troublesome voice may not always be on the side of progressive-leaning politics of gender and sexuality, there is political value in disrupting hierarchies of power and knowledge production that seek to limit access to public spheres for certain subjects. The writings of Sister Souljah support this argument as they demonstrate both the utility and limits of the liberatory rhetoric of a Black nationalism that is invested in a heteropatriarchal vision of Black freedom.

Chapter Four offers an analysis of Lil' Kim as a performer whose musical and visual outputs challenge the restrictive boundaries of Black womanhood. My analysis in this chapter troubles a few of the criticisms of Lil' Kim as an excessively sexualized rapper by placing her embodiments of ideals of white beauty, glamour, and conspicuous consumption in the context of her dialogic engagement with racialized and gendered critiques of hip-hop. In retrospect, as the popularity and success of Nicki Minaj demonstrates, Lil' Kim's boundary-pushing persona broke new ground for women in hip-

hop to command as much respect for their musical talents as their male counterparts.⁵⁶

Lil' Kim, like Woods and Souljah have done in the realm of literature, has provided cultural objects that reveal hip-hop to be a repository site of the experiences of individuals who are connected to larger structural concerns about race, gender, class, and sexuality in American culture.

The places that distribute hip-hop's cultural objects provide access to a material Black public sphere for communities to form and animate discussions that can help forge connections that result in the building of greater worlds amidst non-ideal circumstances. This is significant in the context of neoliberal capitalism which "has constantly projected experiences of human precarity and risk as entrepreneurial/ developmental/funding opportunity" (Bilge 408). The Black urban population knows the condition of precarity under neoliberalism all too well and the growing number of street literature authors, emerging out of the shadow of the prison industrial complex, understand the hip-hop ethos of making something out of nothing in a material sense. The entrepreneurship that drives the street literature industry is, for many, a necessary response to limited resources and economic opportunity. In some ways, the effects of neoliberal capitalism have been an unnamed but predetermined condition of Black urban life.

⁵⁶ The importance of Nicki Minaj's performance and music to culture has been taken up in work on music, gender, and sexuality; for example, see Jess Butler, "For White Girls Only? Postfeminism and the Politics of Inclusion," *Feminist Formations* 25.1 (Spring 2013): 35–58; Savannah Shange, "A King Named Nicki: Strategic Queerness and the Black Femmecee," *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, 24:1 (2014): 29-45; and Marquita R. Smith, "'Or a Real, Real Bad Lesbian': Nicki Minaj and the Acknowledgement of Queer Desire in Hip-Hop Culture," *Popular Music and Society* 37.3 (2014): 360-370.

Retrospection has been one of the most clarifying lenses through which to behold the power and risks of the troublesome voice. The social change initiated by those who refuse to abide by rules or customs that quiet or silence their voices can disrupt oppressive patterns. During my nearly three years of reading, interviewing, listening, and writing for this project, racial trouble has been erupting across the United States with menacing frequency as numerous young Black men and women have been subjected to state-backed violence at the hands of police and self-appointed vigilantes. This violence has given renewed urgency to the raising of troublesome voices. In response to this racialized violence, three Black queer women—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullor, and Opal Tometi founded the organization Black Lives Matter (Hunt). The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter continues to circulate on social media, adding more troublesome voices daily in the fight against Black oppression. Yet, the movement is experiencing its own challenges. While alarming numbers of Black women have also been victims of such state violence, the public outcry has not been nearly as pronounced. There has been difficulty in getting the broader public to reach the realization that Black *women's* lives matter just as well. Another important aspect of the Black Lives Matter movement includes challenging the pernicious calls to retreat to the ideals of respectability politics. The continuation of the “salvific wish” (Jenkins 13), which seeks to protect Black bodies yet restricts them, threatens to discredit and disavow victims of state-sanctioned violence whose personal lives get critiqued or informally put on trial in media discourse as evidence of their presumed disposability. This movement and the responses to it offer an important example of the power of the troublesome voice and the risks it may pose when

used by recalcitrant forces that acknowledge its presence only to discredit and dismiss its calls for change.

As this dissertation has shown, the troublesome voice holds political potential and risks as it can disrupt norms and expectations or reify problematic discourse. For street literature readers and hip-hop listeners, the acts of negotiating meanings from such texts and creating counter-discourse are important parts of the process of cultural consumption and the troublesome voice is a model of possibility that relies on such interpretive practices.

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Appendix A: Oral Script for Recruitment and Consent

Introduction:

Hello. I'm Marquita Smith. I am conducting interviews about street lit. I'm conducting this as part of my PhD research at McMaster University's Cultural Studies program in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. [*For Newark:* I'm a Rutgers-Newark graduate and former resident of Newark.]

I'm asking patrons of [insert bookstore name] to participate in these interviews because the bookstore sells the books my research is concerned with. Since you have visited the store I am assuming you are a reader of street lit.

What will happen during the study?

I'm inviting you to do a one-on-one face-to-face interview that will only take about 10-15 minutes. I will ask you questions about street lit such as "How often do you read street lit?" and "Why does street lit appeal to you?" I will take handwritten notes to record your answers, and if you consent, use an audio recorder to make sure I don't miss what you say.

Consent questions:

- Do you agree to participate in this study knowing that you can withdraw up until July 1, 2014 with no consequences to you?
- Do you have any questions or would like any additional details?

A detailed letter of information that explains any potential risks and confidentiality practices will be provided to you.

Appendix B: Letter of Information



DATE: _____

LETTER OF INFORMATION / CONSENT

A Study of/about: The Readership of Street Lit (Popular Urban Fiction)

Investigator:

Student Investigator:

Marquita Smith
Department of English & Cultural Studies
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
(905) 525-9140 ext. 24491
E-mail: smithmr4@mcmaster.ca

Faculty Supervisor:

Dr. Mary O'Connor
Department of English & Cultural Studies
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
905-525-9140 ext. 23731

Purpose of the Study

I am doing this research for my thesis, which will analyze the role and importance of readers of the popular urban fiction genre referred to as “street lit.” Readers of street lit will be invited to voice their own opinions about the significance of the genre and how they relate or do not relate to mainstream literary culture.

Procedures involved in the Research

I’m inviting you to do a one-on-one face-to-face interview that will only take about 10-15 minutes. I will ask you questions about street lit such as “How often do you read street lit?” and “Why does street lit appeal to you?” I will take handwritten notes to record your answers and, if you consent, I will also use an audio recorder to make sure I don’t miss what you say. I will also ask you for some demographic/background information like your age and education.

Potential Harms, Risks or Discomforts:

It is not likely that there will be any substantial harms or discomforts associated with the interview. You may worry about how others will react to what you say or you might find some questions uncomfortable to answer. You do not need to answer questions that make you feel uncomfortable or if you feel they are too personal in nature or outside the scope of the study. You can withdraw your participation at any time during the interview. If you wish to withdraw your participation after the interview you may do so up until July 1, 2014 for this study. I describe below the steps I am taking to protect your privacy.

Potential Benefits

It is unlikely that there will be direct benefits to you, however, by better understanding how readers of street lit feel about their reading habits researchers and others may be able to understand the importance of black popular fiction to the communities that support it.

Confidentiality

I will keep the information you tell me during the interview secure and anonymized. In my standard research practice, your name as a participant will not be reported with the information you provide. However, people are often identified through the stories they tell. Information I put in my report that could identify you will not be published or shared beyond the research team unless we have your permission. If you would like to be openly acknowledged in the study please sign for consent in the last section of this letter. Any data from this research which will be shared or published will be the combined data of all participants. That means it will be reported for the whole group, not for individual persons.

Participation and Withdrawal

- Your participation in this study is voluntary.
- You can decide to stop at any time, even part-way through the interview for whatever reason, or up until July 1, 2014.
- If you decide to stop participating, there will be no consequences to you.
- If you decide to stop we will ask you how you would like us to handle the data collected up to that point.
- This could include returning it to you, destroying it or using the data collected up to that point.
- If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.
- If you have any questions about this study or would like more information you can email Marquita Smith at smithmr4@mcmaster.ca.

Information about the Study Results

I expect to have this study completed by approximately August 2014. If you would like a brief summary of the results, please let me know how you would like it sent to you.

Questions about the Study

If you have questions or need more information about the study itself, please contact me at: Smithmr4@mcmaster.ca

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board and received ethics clearance.

If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Secretariat
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142
c/o Research Office for Administrative Development and Support
E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

DETAILED CONSENT

Name of Participant (Printed) _____

1. I agree that the interview can be audio recorded.

... Yes.

... No.

2. I grant permission to have identifying information from this interview such as first name or initials published in this study.

... No

... Yes

3. ...Yes, I would like to receive a summary of the study's results.

Please send them to this email address _____

Or to this mailing address: _____

... No, I do not want to receive a summary of the study's results.

Appendix C: Interview Guide

Interview Questions

A Study of the Readership of Street Lit (Popular Urban Fiction)

Marquita Smith (PhD Candidate)

(Department of English & Cultural Studies – McMaster University)

Information about these interview questions: This gives you an idea what I would like to learn about the reading culture involving street lit. Interviews will be one-to-one and will be open-ended (not just “yes or no” answers). Because of this, the exact wording may change a little. Sometimes I will use other short questions to make sure I understand what you told me or if I need more information when we are talking such as: “*So, you are saying that ...?*”), to get more information (“*Please tell me more?*”), or to learn what you think or feel about something (“*Why do you think that is...?*”).

- 1) Are you a regular reader of street lit? Do you listen to hip-hop?
- 2) How often do you read street lit? Where do you get your books from?
- 3) Why does street lit appeal to you?
- 4) Do your friends or family members read the same kinds of books? Do you talk to each other about them?
- 5) What is the connection between hip-hop and street lit, in your view?
- 6) How are black women represented in street lit?
- 7) Is gender (of the author, characters) a factor in what books you choose to read?
- 8) Is there something important I forgot to ask or is there anything else you think I need to know about reading street lit?
- 9) Information about you: Your age now? Are you a resident of Newark/Philly/Harlem? What is your education level?

END

Appendix D: Email Recruitment Script

Email Recruitment Script
Marquita Smith,
PhD Candidate in Cultural Studies
A Study of the Readership of Street Lit (Popular Urban Fiction)

E-mail Subject line: McMaster Study – The Readership of Street Lit (Popular Urban Fiction)

I am writing to request a brief interview with the owner/operator of [Urban Knowledge Bookstore **OR** Black and Nobel Bookstore] and, potentially, permission to speak with a random selection of bookstore patrons during a visit to the bookstore. This would require spending a few hours in the store over multiple days. As part of graduate program in Cultural Studies at McMaster University, I am carrying out a study to learn what readers of street lit think about their role in literary culture. I'm especially interested in their feelings about having a voice within or outside of mainstream literary culture and how women (as writers and readers) are viewed in the realm of street lit.

I selected your bookstore because of my familiarity with it from living in/near Newark/Philly for several years. I am a graduate of Rutgers-Newark and have been to the store and recall how important the space is to readers looking for the books that appeal to them.

It is expected that there will be no risks to you or your patrons in taking part in this study. You can stop at any time. I have attached a copy of a letter of information about the study that gives you full details. This study has been reviewed and cleared by the McMaster Research Ethics Board. If you any have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is being conducted you can contact:

The McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142
c/o Research Office for Administration, Development and Support (ROADS)
E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

I would like to thank you in advance for your time and consideration. After a month, I will send you a one-time follow-up reminder.

Marquita Smith,
PhD Candidate in Cultural Studies
Department of English & Cultural Studies
McMaster University, Hamilton Ontario
Tel: 905-525-9140 Ext: 24491
smithmr4@mcmaster.ca

Appendix E: Letter of Appreciation

Letter of Appreciation for Participants
Marquita Smith,
PhD Candidate in Cultural Studies
A Study of the Readership of Street Lit (Popular Urban Fiction)

Dear *(Insert Name of Participant)*,

I would like to thank you for your participation my study of the readership of street lit. As a reminder, the purpose of this study is to learn what readers of street lit think about their role in literary culture and how women (as writers and readers) are viewed in the realm of street lit.

The data collected during interviews will contribute to a better understanding of the importance or significance of street lit to its audience.

Please remember that any data pertaining to you as an individual participant will be kept confidential. Once all the data are collected and analyzed for this project, I plan on sharing this information with the research community through presentations, journal articles, my dissertation, and possibly a book. If you are interested in receiving more information regarding the results of this study, or would like a summary of the results, please provide your email address, and when the study is completed, anticipated by August 2014, I will send you the information. In the meantime, if you have any questions about the study, please do not hesitate to contact me by email or telephone as noted below.

This study has been reviewed and cleared by the McMaster Research Ethics Board. If you any have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is being conducted you can contact:


The McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142
c/o Research Office for Administration, Development and Support (ROADS)
E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

Marquita Smith,
PhD Candidate in Cultural Studies
Department of English & Cultural Studies
McMaster University, Hamilton Ontario
Tel: 905-525-9140 Ext: 24491
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Appendix F: Ethics Clearance Certificate

MREB Clearance Certificate

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		McMaster University Research Ethics Board (MREB) c/o Research Office for Administrative Development and Support, MREB Secretariat, GH-305, e-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca	
CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS CLEARANCE TO INVOLVE HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH			
Application Status: New <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Addendum <input type="checkbox"/> Project Number: 2013 025			
TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT: Troublesome Voices: Representing Black Womanhood through Street Lit and Hip Hop			
Faculty Investigator (s)/ Supervisor(s)	Dept./Address	Phone	E-Mail
M. O'Connor	English & Cultural Studies	24491	smithmr4@mcmaster.ca
Student Investigator(s)	Dept./Address	Phone	E-Mail
M. Smith	English & Cultural Studies	23731	mooconnor@mcmaster.ca
The application in support of the above research project has been reviewed by the MREB to ensure compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement and the McMaster University Policies and Guidelines for Research Involving Human Participants. The following ethics certification is provided by the MREB:			
<input type="checkbox"/> The application protocol is cleared as presented without questions or requests for modification. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The application protocol is cleared as revised without questions or requests for modification. <input type="checkbox"/> The application protocol is cleared subject to clarification and/or modification as appended or identified below:			
COMMENTS AND CONDITIONS: Ongoing clearance is contingent on completing the annual completed/status report. A "Change Request" or amendment must be made and cleared before any alterations are made to the research.			
Reporting Frequency:		Annual: Mar-10-2014	Other:
Date: Mar-10-2013		Chair, Dr. B. Detlor / Vice Chair, C. Anderson: 